

## GUIDELINES FOR PARTICIPATING IN FIRST NATIONS SWEATS

### Introduction

This is intended to only be a general guide for participating in Saskatchewan sweats. The Woodland Cree, Swampy Cree, Plains Cree, Dene, Nakawe (Saulteaux), Dakota, Nakota, Lakota and Metis each have their own beliefs and practices associated with sweats. In addition each practitioner has specific protocols that he or she follows when conducting their sweats. The first time attending a sweat with a specific practitioner talk with someone who has participated in that practitioner's sweats to gain an insight on what to expect or contact the practitioner to ask specific questions.

### Background

Contrary to some people's beliefs, the sweat is not just a sauna; it is a very sacred ceremony. Further a sweat should not be an endurance contest to show how "tough" you are or where you flaunt your "cultural identity" nor is it a place for you to earn your "culture badge." Given the sacredness of the sweat you need to be humble and pray to purify yourself physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. In essence a sweat is a prayer ceremony for cleansing which is essential to healing and restoring balance in one's life. Some practitioners use the sweat for other purposes such a doctoring, preparing people for other ceremonies or to undertake specific projects, to secure spiritual support for individual or group initiatives, and to give thanks for accomplishments, honors received, or the benefits of life in general.

All Saskatchewan First Nations and Metis sweats are held in a dome shaped lodge made of willows that is covered with cloth canvases and/or blankets. In the center of the lodge there is a rock pit for the heated stones who are commonly referred to as grandfathers. A fire pit for heating the rocks is located near the sweat lodge. Between the fire pit and sweat lodge typically there is an area that is designated as an altar where sacred objects related to the sweat will be placed. All lodges have at least one door. What direction the door opens to varies based on the culture and teachings of the practitioner. Some practitioners have to build a new lodge for each sweat. Most practitioners have an established sweat site and today some have an indoor sweat lodge for winter. All Saskatchewan sweats have four rounds. Sometimes a practitioner may have an additional round for doctoring. During a round the door is closed causing it to become pitch dark in the lodge. While a round is in session water is put on the hot rocks which causes the lodge to become filled with hot steam. Between rounds the door or doors are opened to allow steam to escape thus giving the participants a break from the intensity of the steam. The type and number of rocks used varies based on purpose and the practitioner.

Co-ed sweats were not a common practice in the past. Today there are a number of practitioners who conduct co-ed sweats but not all. Co-ed sweats are an option for those who do not have cultural constraints or personal inhibitions.

All stages of sweat are part of the ceremony beginning with the determination to have a sweat. Being respectful in behavior and speech during all stages of the ceremony is essential. The stages vary from culture to culture and practitioner to practitioner. Listed below are the common stages for a Lakota sweat:

- Start fire to heat the rocks
- Participants arrive and change. Men line up on south side of door, women on the north side. This is a good time ask questions to clarify protocol.
  - The host will present tobacco and cloth (six colors) to the practitioner. Other participants who have a specific prayer requests will present tobacco and optional cloth offerings to the practitioner informing him/her of their needs.
  - A large tobacco bundle (flag) is made for each of the six colors of cloth offered by the host (if other participants bring the six colors their cloth their is also made into bundles/flags to be taken into the sweat)
  - A helper will smudge the tobacco offering/flags and participants
  - If a pipe or pipes are being used as part of the sweat, a pipe filling ceremony will be done after all the

participants have been smudged. The loaded pipes will be placed on the altar.

- Participants will enter the sweat after the smudge or smudge and pipe filling, women enter first and sit on north side, men enter after the women and sit on the south side.
- After the participants are situated in the lodge, the first round of rocks are put in the rock pit. In a Lakota sweat it is common to use 28 rocks; sixteen of those rocks are taken in during the first round, and four rocks will be brought in each of the remaining three rounds.
- When the rocks are in the lodge the practitioner will enter and sit on the north side of the door and then the helper will enter and sit on the south side of the door.
- Usually one helper stays on the outside to serve as a doorman and to tend the fire.
- Round 1: the host shares with the participants why he/she is hosting the sweat and makes a prayer specific to their needs. Water is then poured on the rocks and two prayers songs are sung. This is the participants' time to pray in their own way or sing along. An integral part of prayer is sacrifice and sweat requires a certain amount of personal sacrifice. If you are feeling overwhelmed by the heat, praying and singing helps, you can also breathe through a wet wash cloth or cover your head with your towel. Try not to leave during a round.
- At the end of the round the door will be opened so you can cool off and drink water. If you need, you can get out. If you are able to you can return when the next round starts or at the start of a latter round.
- Round 2: All participants will be given an opportunity to say a prayer ending with "all my relations." "Mitakuye oyasin" which means "all of my relations" is a Lakota prayer that acknowledges the relationship, connection and interdependence of all things with in the universe. Those who do not want to share their prayer can pray silently and say "all my relations." Once all the prayers are said again water will be poured on the rocks and two prayers songs will be sung then the door will be opened.
- Round 3: Focuses on healing needs. Some individuals may be doctored. Once again water will be poured on the rocks and two prayer songs will be sung then the door will be opened.
- Round 4: The focus is on thanksgiving. Water is poured on the rocks and songs of thanks giving are sung. When the door is opened the participants can leave the lodge unless a pipe or pipes are being used. The pipe/pipes will be passed around to all the participants. Each male and female will have an opportunity to smoke the pipe, those who are not comfortable with smoking the pipe can touch the mouth piece to their chest in the vicinity of their heart and pass it on after saying "all my relations." After the pipe/pipes have been passed around, closing songs will be sung. Following the songs the pipes will be taken apart and put away. When the pipes are put away the participants are free to leave the sweat.

- The length of a sweat varies depending on the number of participants, the prayers, and the amount of teaching and doctoring but on the average they are about two hours long.

- After the final round, everyone should dry off and change into dry clothing.
- Everyone should take part in the potluck meal at the sweat site or at a house or designate facility nearby.
- Before the meal starts, a plate is made to thank the spirits for life and to pray that life may continue. A small amount of each of the foods being served is placed on the plate along with tobacco. The spirit plate is prayed over and taken out to sweat altar.
- Gifts for the practitioner and his/her helpers should be given during the meal. The gifting can be done discreetly or as a public acknowledgement. Sometimes participants may also share gifts with other participants at this time.

### **Requesting to Sweat**

- If you are interested in hosting a sweat for your family or organization the first step is organize your thoughts about why you want the sweat, who would participate, and to have some idea as to when you want it. The second step is to identify a practitioner to ask to conduct the sweat. If you do not know one, contacts a First Nations organization in your community or a First Nation in your area for information on potential practitioners and their contact information. Arrange a meeting with the practitioner you want to ask to conduct the sweat. Take an offering of tobacco to gift the practitioner when you meet to discuss your request. If he or she is not able to fulfill your request they should be able to refer you to another practitioner. If the practitioner agrees to

assist you, make sure to set a date, time and place because that initial offering of tobacco commits the practitioner and you. It's similar to a contract with a firm date. You should also get directions on his/her expectations. Do not hesitate to ask questions because if you do they assume you know what is needed.

- Rocks, wood, and water are among the essentials for having a sweat. In the past rocks, wood and water were not an expense when having a sweat. Today they are. When hosting a sweat plan to cover those costs.
- First Nations practitioners are given special gifts to conduct ceremonies that are required to perpetuate life thus they are obligated to help the people. In First Nations cultures it is believed that when humans take something from the natural world, to demonstrate their gratitude they must offer something back. This belief extends to asking individuals to share their traditional knowledge and skills to benefit others. Thus practitioners and their helpers should be given gifts to show gratitude for the assistance they have provided. To prepare for and run a sweat is equal to a full day's work. Practitioners' and their helpers have living expenses and travel expenses just like everyone else but most do not have salaried employment. This should be kept in mind when gifting the practitioner and his/her helpers.
- As a host you should expect to provide a reasonable gift and travel expenses to the practitioner and one or two helpers. If the practitioner stresses that specific dollar amounts should be paid and/or if you do not feel comfortable and safe with the practitioner and their expectations walk away before making a firm commitment.
- You do not have to host a sweat to participate in one. Unless a host has specified that participation in a sweat is limited to certain individuals, practitioners typically welcome any adults who want to sweat provided they have good intentions and follow protocol. In addition, most practitioners host weekly sweats for family members and individuals who want to sweat on regular basis.
- If you want to participate in a sweat in your area but do not know a practitioner or have a friend who participates in local sweats you will need to contact a First Nations organization in your community or the nearest First Nation to obtain information on local sweats and contact numbers. Before attending the sweat, if possible make arrangements to meet with the practitioner to introduce yourself, offer him/her tobacco and make them aware that you want to sweat. In most cases the practitioner will extend an invitation to you to participate in a scheduled sweat. In response you should ask what they expect of participants.
- Even if you are not hosting the sweat; you should gift the practitioner and his/her helpers and provide a something for the potluck meal after the sweat. Your contribution should be means based. If you have significant financial constraints do not let it deter you from participating.

## Risks

- There have been reports of sweat related deaths resulting from overexposure to heat, dehydration, smoke inhalation, or improper lodge construction leading to suffocation. Therefore it is very important to know if the practitioner leading the sweat is properly trained and reputable.
- Even people, who are experienced with sweats, and attending a sweat led by a properly-trained and reputable practitioner, could suddenly experience problems due to health issues. If your doctor has told you to refrain from using a hot tub or sauna because of a health condition you should get doctor approval before participating in a sweat. Note, if you have a respiratory condition or allergies, in addition to hot steam, you will be exposed smoke from the fire pit used to heat the rocks and smudges used in the ceremony. If you have no physician directed restrictions but have a chronic health condition, phobias, get anxiety attacks or are pregnant you should let the practitioner know before the sweat starts so that they are aware and if needed provide special instructions for you. An experienced practitioner will know how to help you with any safety concerns and will do so without hesitation.
- If you plan to have children under 16 participate you should discuss their participation with the practitioner. There are special considerations in regard to the participation of young children. Not all practitioners allow children participate in their sweats.

- The presence of persons under the influence of recreational drugs and/or alcohol and menstruating women will conflict with the energy flow which will interfere with the ceremony and may cause participants to become ill.
- Wearing metal jewelry or taking other metal objects into the sweat can be dangerous as metal objects may become hot enough to burn the wearer or person holding them.
- Contact lenses and synthetic clothing should not be worn in sweat as the heat can cause the materials to melt and adhere to eyes, skin, or whatever they might be touching.
- Hot rocks can explode when cold water is poured on them. Occasionally a small fragment of rock may pop out of the rock pit. Therefore participants should try to keep their feet away from the fire pit when the water is being poured on the rocks.
- Each sweat participant needs enough room to sit comfortably with their legs stretched out in front of them. A sweat lodge does not grow thus for safety the number of participants in a sweat should be limited. If there are a large number of number people who want to participate there should be an option for a second sweat either to follow the first one or on another day. Another option is to engage a second practitioner so that two sweats can be held simultaneously.

### **Preparation**

- The sweat is a cleansing ceremony therefore it is recommended that you refrain from the use of recreational drugs and/or alcohol at least four days prior. For your personal wellbeing, do not enter the sweat if you used recreational drugs and/or alcohol 48 hours prior to the sweat. The repercussions of this are too many, too varied and sometimes too severe to discuss here. Following the sweat you need to refrain from using recreational drugs and/or alcohol for a minimum of 24 hours after, preferably four days. Again there are repercussions associated.
- Historically abstinence from sexual activity before and after a sweat was a requirement. Some practitioners still expect 1 to 4 days of abstinence before and after.
- Women who have an active monthly menstrual cycle are gifted with a natural form of cleansing. In the past First Nations women had moon time ceremonies they participated in monthly when it was their time. The women's spirit during their moon time or menstruation is very powerful and can overpower the spirits of sacred objects, children and men therefore women who are menstruating, are about to begin or are just completing their monthly menstruation should not participate in the sweat. Further out of respect they should not come to the site. If it is essential for a women who is menstruating to be at the sweat, discuss that matter with the practitioner who may propose alternatives.
- Make an effort to be well hydrated, in the days leading up to the sweat drink at least 8 glasses of water a day.
- Don't eat a heavy meal right before the sweat; it puts a strain on the circulatory and respiratory systems. Eat lightly, and wait a few hours.

### **What to Bring**

- Tobacco offerings ( a pouch of tobacco/pack of cigarettes or traditional tobacco ties)
- Cloth (must for host, optional for other participants) Each First Nations culture has their own color requirements and some practitioners have specific requirements. For example, the Dakota/Lakota typically require the host to provide 1 meter each of black, red, yellow, white, green, and light blue/turquoise with a pouch of tobacco to make directional flags and participants who want to offer cloth may bring the six colors, 1 meter of red or meter of calico print. If you do not know what is expected inquire.
- If you have a pipe, rattle, drum or other objects that you would like to use at the sweat or have prayers said for, bring them, but make sure the practitioner and host aware of your intentions before the sweat starts. They will give you direction.
- Food and/or drinks for the potluck meal following the sweat (no alcoholic beverages)

- A plate, bowl, cup, and utensils for yourself. Leftovers cannot be wasted or thrown away so bring containers and bags to help take leftovers home.
- Water for you to drink before and after the sweat.
- A folding chair/lawn chair or blanket to sit on before and after sweat
- If the sweat runs into the evening it is helpful to bring a flashlight and in summer bug spray to use after the sweat.
- If its cool or may rain bring a jacket. In winter bring the clothing required to stay warm before and after the sweat.

## **What to Wear**

### ***Women***

- Before and after the sweat, to honor grandmother earth and womanhood many practitioners require women to wear a calf length modest dress with sleeves or a sleeved top with a skirt. Some will accept pants or capris worn with a modest sleeved top. Do not wear revealing tops nor shorts/ skirts that are above the knees.
- During the sweat wear a cotton/cotton blend calf length sleeved loose fitting dress, night gown, or a skirt with a sleeved top or t shirt. Make sure that what you wear is thick enough or dark enough so that it does not become revealing when wet.

### ***Men***

- Before and after the sweat, a shirt should be worn with pants or shirts that are knee length or longer.
- During the sweat cotton/cotton blend swimming trunks or shorts

### ***General***

- Minimize perfume scents and make up, some practitioners are opposed to wearing them. In the sweat the makeup won't stay on anyway; it will run down your face, into your eyes causing them to become irritated.
- Jewelry should be minimized and what is worn needs to be removed before going into the sweat. Also note metal jewelry can become hot enough to burn the wearer.
- Eyeglasses and contacts need to be removed before going into the sweat. They can be left at the altar.
- Have a large towel to take into the sweat with you and a second towel to dry yourself after the sweat. Some participants take in a wet wash cloth to assist their breathing during the sweat.
- Before and after sweat wear weather appropriate shoes for outdoor activity. When entering the sweat leave shoes near the sweat but not at the altar.

## **Etiquette**

- Respect is of utmost importance when participating in a sweat. Respect for the grandmother earth and sweat site; respect for the practitioner and his/her helpers, and respect for other participants.
- Respect includes confidentiality, what is said in the sweat should remain there. There are consequences for gossiping about peoples' conduct and what is said.
- Modesty is an essential part of demonstrating respect.
- Out of respect, do not litter or do things that would be harmful to grandmother earth, the plant or animal life.
- Sharing is also key to being respectful. There is a lot of work that goes into having a sweat. Helping with preparation and cleanup is good way to demonstrate respect.

- Don't bother other people's property, it's not respectful. If they have something you are curious about or would like to use, ask.
- The fire for heating the rocks is sacred. Be respectful; do not throw garbage in the fire pit.
- Each practitioner has protocols regarding their sweat alter, demonstrate respect by learning what those protocols are and following them.
- Respect commitments made when praying or seeking assistance from the practitioner, those commitments should not be taken lightly; there are spiritual repercussions to not following through with commitments made.
- Gratitude is a key aspect of respect and is essential to perpetuating life; make sure to acknowledge the spirits, the practitioner and others from whose support you have benefited from.