

Indigenous Interdisciplinary Land-based Research Space created in Kananaskis Country is first of its kind in Canada

Sometimes, the right door opens at the right time — often metaphorically — but, for [Dr. Jennifer Leason](#), PhD, it was physical, too.

In 2022, Leason, associate professor in the [Faculty of Arts](#), was hosting a gathering for Indigenous maternity storytelling at the [Kananaskis Centre Barrier Lake Field Station](#). As Leason and her team were preparing for the day — ceremony, digital story recordings, a sharing circle — Kananaskis Centre field research manager Adrienne Cummings opened a door.

Cummings took Leason on a tour of the station's Forestry Building, originally built in the 1960s and now rarely used and in need of repair. The two agreed that the building had untapped potential, and that Leason was the person to lead the project of bringing life back to its walls.

“As soon as I saw the space, I said, ‘this is perfect,’” recounts Leason. As she hosted more gatherings at the field station, a vision for a new Indigenous research facility took shape.

The space will be purpose-built to integrate Indigenous language, cultural ceremony, land, place, and connect to research and research methodologies.

Leason's vision for the facility is that it will transform the research culture at the University of Calgary, and how Indigenous research is applied in the real world and train a new generation of researchers.



From left: Deborah McGregor, Jennifer Leason and Yvonne Poitras Pratt

“Research is only as good as the impact it has in community,” she says. “The impact will be measured by the relationships, the bringing folks together, the inclusion of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students, and the opportunities that we create for them and for generations to come.”

Leason, a member of the Minegoziibe Anishinabe Nation in Manitoba, and collaborators Drs. Deborah McGregor and Yvonne Poitras Pratt, both PhD, have been awarded a Canada Foundation for Innovation John R. Evans Leadership Fund (CFI JELF) grant to transform the old building into the Indigenous Interdisciplinary Land-based Research Space, the first of its kind in Canada.

The natural world in Kananaskis offers meaningful land-based learning and activities to enrich the experience of research participants and community members engaged in research projects.

Land, space and place align for the ‘perfect’ opportunity

“It’s out in the land, it’s out in territory, and it’s connected to space and place,” Leason says. At a gathering of Indigenous midwives from across Canada, attendees shared with Leason that they found the medicines they needed for teachings just outside the doors of the research station. At another gathering, after sharing stories of Indigenous maternity and birth experiences, participants would spend time outside on the land to gather their thoughts.

In her digital storytelling work with the Fishing Lake Métis Settlement community, Poitras Pratt has also seen how connection to land can be a healing force.

“I remember one of the Métis youth telling me that she had never thought of the settlement lands as beautiful before taking part in creating a digital story,” she says. “This connection to land fosters pride and a sense of belonging to something bigger than oneself.”



The Forestry Building at Barrier Lake Field Station, set to be transformed into an Indigenous Interdisciplinary land-based research space.

Adrian Shellard

Renovations will begin in 2026, including building upgrades to add a designated space for Elders and Knowledge Keepers, a data analysis lab, a kitchen, and two large gathering spaces. The first space will be able to accommodate small gatherings for smudging and ceremony. The second space is the digital storytelling circle, equipped with tools for qualitative and quantitative data gathering, and technology to support digital storytelling.

Digital storytelling lab a safe space for imagining a bright future is possible

“A lot of us come from an oral tradition of stories and storytelling and the importance of the digital storytelling lab is an opportunity

to utilize that as a methodology,” says Leason.

The dedicated digital storytelling lab represents a safe space for Indigenous people to tell their stories, and a place where imagining a brighter future is possible, says Poitras Pratt. It will facilitate innovative knowledge generation by youth, Traditional Knowledge Holders, students and others to share significant insights that can strengthen the resilience of Indigenous communities.

“It’s an opportunity to train students in Indigenous statistics and Indigenous data sovereignty and how it can help inform and support our communities in advancing the needs and priorities that are identified within community,” says Leason.

Leason points to the circles included in the design of the rooms as creating a culture of research where people are working together. “In that circle, no one is greater or lesser than,” she says. “Everything comes with its own unique perspective and purpose, but, ultimately, it’s the collaborations and the intersections that are going to bring folks together.”

‘Everything is interconnected, everything is interrelated’

Interdisciplinarity is key to the team behind the grant.

“I focus on health, Yvonne focuses on education, and Deborah focuses on environmental science,” Leason says. “It’s this beautiful way of thinking about the synergies between disciplines and methodologies. Within an Indigenous epistemology, we’re taught that everything is interconnected, everything is interrelated. This space is ultimately a hub of interdisciplinary research and connection.”