

Ottawa

Powwow circuit disrupted by COVID-19

Organizers feel for loss of popular events, missed opportunities for vendors

[John Chidley-Hill](#) · The Canadian Press · Posted: May 25, 2020 3:07 PM ET | Last Updated: May 25



Indigenous dancers from the Wikwemikong Cultural Festival in 2014 held every summer on Manitoulin Island. Wikwemkoong's traditional powwow has been cancelled this year because of COVID-19. (Yvon Theriault/CBC)

Romaine Mitchell is confident that a summer without powwows will be "just a small blip" in the cultural history of Indigenous people.

Mitchell has been a fixture on North America's powwow circuit for more than 30 years, but restrictions on public gatherings because of COVID-19 have led to the cancellation of all 12 events he planned to attend this summer.

Although losing an entire season is disappointing, Mitchell said First Nations culture was able to survive colonization and having such cultural celebrations outlawed — so losing one year for the common good is a relatively minor problem.

"Given the colonial movement's attempts to assimilate all people into one melting pot, many of the traditions and cultures that we have in order to maintain them and for them to survive had to be taken underground," he said.

"Our celebrations and our ceremonies we had done in secret."

Akwesasne's powwow likely cancelled

Mitchell is the co-chair of the powwow organizing committee for the Akwesasne First Nation, a territory that straddles the borders of Ontario, Quebec and New York state.

The reserve is predominantly inhabited by Kanien'keha:ka — commonly known as Mohawk — and the community puts an emphasis on respect for its elders and veterans.

Given that the novel coronavirus can have particularly severe effects on older people, Mitchell said Akwesasne's mid-September powwow will likely be cancelled this year.

"As a committee that's what we're watching — what's the tail end going to look like of this?" Mitchell said. "Yes, you're going to have your apex and then you're going to have your tail.

"But how far is that tail going to go? At what point will we as a community be safe to open our gates? It's looking like that tail is going to go just beyond the date of our powwow."

Loss for vendors

Josée Bourgeois, a dancer who performs at powwows across the continent, was holding out hope that she would be able to make her planned schedule of events.

That optimism dwindled as the end of May and usual start of powwow season drew near.

"We are just now experiencing that sense of loss because weeks ago it was still like, 'Well, you never know! maybe they'll still happen!'" Bourgeois said.

"But no, that's not the case."

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Although Mitchell and Bourgeois aren't especially worried about the cultural impact of having no powwows, they do have other concerns.

Bourgeois said she's worried that the cancellation of powwows will have consequences for people who have been housebound all winter.

"It's something that people look forward to so much," said Bourgeois, who is from Pikwakanagan, the Algonquin community northwest of Ottawa that has cancelled its August powwow.

"There's a lot of reasons why people would be spiritually, emotionally and mentally affected from this."





Pikawakanagan declared a state of emergency on March 31, due to COVID-19. The First Nation is planning to allow businesses to reopen with restrictions on Friday. (Submitted by Wendy Jocko)

Mitchell said he's concerned with the economic impact, as powwows are a financial boost for the host territories as well as neighbouring communities.

He said Akwesasne's powwow draws approximately 6,000 visitors every year, filling hotels in nearby Cornwall, Ont.

Also, as a vendor of traditional First Nations clothes and accessories, Mitchell said the cancellation of powwows will also affect his family and other Indigenous-owned small businesses.

"Many of them are independent contractors and performers that are impacted by it," Mitchell said. "It's a ripple that's affected and felt throughout all of Indian country."



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