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Gadugi Degvgasesdvi Anigiduwagi Dodalvi

## Working Together to Steward the Kituwah Mountains<sup>1</sup>



July 26, 2024

*This letter is from the Elohi Dinigatiyi (Earth Keepers), a group of elder Kituwah speakers and expert practitioners who were created to advise the Natural Resources Department of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, to all potential partner governments and organizations who are concerned with the Kituwah Mountains (aka, the Southern Appalachian Mountains).*

We begin with the deepest sense of humility and gratitude to our Kituwah ancestors, who for thousands of years stewarded our homelands to ensure the health and harmony of our People and all of our relatives in the natural world, and who bequeathed to us the language, the culture, the knowledge, and the social and political systems that will enable us to continue to live in health and harmony for thousands more years into the future.


Our purpose with this letter is to convey the ancient Kituwah understandings and principles that have guided our respectful and harmonious relationship with our mountain homelands and with each other in stewarding these lands. These principles are the foundations for our science and systems of stewarding our relationships with our natural and human relatives. They are fundamental truths, natural laws, that were discovered and refined by our ancestors over the thousands of years of interacting with their natural relatives and other humans and Peoples in these mountains. As the newest participant with our mountain homelands, it is our expectation that these principles will help you understand and respect us and our sovereignty and will position you to enter into new relationships with us and these lands that would permit all of our children to live in peace and harmony with these mountains and with each other for generations to come.

### Principles:

1. **Yadvnedi.** Our relationship with the earth begins with our responsibility for the mountains, forests, waters, plants, and animals of our homelands. We Kituwah; our knowledge, our culture, our wisdom, our identity, our joy, and our happiness; are a product of, and are inseparable and indivisible from, these lands. We are taught that we are connected to all that is here, and that these lands, streams, and celestials are part of us, and we are part of them. Our responsibility derives from our ancestor's realization that we humans have disproportionate power to do damage to our natural relatives, as well as disproportionate power to heal the earth. Though we have been dispossessed and disconnected from most of our mountains and natural relatives, we feel it is our continued responsibility to share what we know about our homelands and what is required to restore and protect them. It is also our responsibility to mobilize any body and any effort necessary to adequately protect and sustain these immeasurably essential, inspiring, and beautiful mountains and forests we all now call home.
2. **Ageya Uligediyvi.** Our ancestors recognized not only that women were the providers and sustainers of all life, but that they were one with the earth and all life on the earth, and thus the primary source of wisdom and healing both of the earth and our People. The lunar cycles that drive all life's rhythms, and the water that is the medium for all new life are manifestations of this deep intrinsic relationship. Our terms for love, and our concepts for wellness, health, and the earth all stem from our word for woman. The centrality of female knowledge and connectedness was reflected in our


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matrilineal social and political systems, and the reason they were responsible for major tribal decisions regarding the making of war, peace, and punishment. The restoration of their roles has become particularly urgent given the immeasurable trauma, sickness, and self-harm that resulted from the disconnection from our matrilineal traditions and our natural relatives and continues to tear apart our families and our children - the most precious of all of our gifts on this earth.

3. **Golisdi Vyelida Idehvi.** We are taught that humans are only one of many relatives in the natural world, and certainly not in the center or the most important. All relatives are essential and have their own role and contribution, and all are necessary for each of us to live and thrive. For these reasons we celebrate, respect, and appreciate all life in all its forms and are inclusive of all types of humans and other relatives. And furthermore, it is our belief that humans came last on the earth and have much to learn from other plants and animals that have learned to successfully conduct themselves in relationship with each other. In this sense, it is misguided and insulting to consider our plant and animal relatives as “resources” for our, human, benefit. And similarly misguided to attempt to “manage” our plant and animal relatives for solely our benefit or be exclusive or hierarchical in our relations with each other.
4. **Adageyuda.** We are also taught that we have a responsibility to actively engage with our relatives – caring for and cultivating them as they care for and cultivate us. In this sense our relationship with the natural world is reciprocal, and active engagement with natural ecosystems, plants, and wildlife is essential to keep them, and all of us, healthy and prosperous, as well as resilient to change. Our ancestors also instilled in us the truth that knowing how and when to care for our relatives requires constant observation, monitoring, as well as research and innovation. For these reasons our People established systems for understanding the status of ourselves and our relatives. For us, not actively engaging with and monitoring the health of our natural relatives is an act of irresponsibility and abuse. This principle is particularly important today given that our homelands have been severely harmed and degraded by colonization, industrialization, and overzealous protection.
5. **Gadugi.** This principle, of working together for the common good, is born of our love and appreciation for ourselves, our ancestors, our science, and our traditional institutions. It expresses our unity in supporting and sustaining our communities and our organizations, our gratitude for what we have, and our commitment to serve others and the natural world that has always sustained us. Our commitment to Gadugi is demonstrated today by our vibrant language programs, community organizations, public schools, health systems and government agencies, and the growing number of cultural organizations that are reconnecting us and our youth to our lands, our traditions, and our language. This principle is also demonstrated today by our outreach to the many new governments and organizations active in our homelands, and our constant and generous search for respectful working relationships with them.
6. **Duyugodvhi.** Our ancestors also taught us that there was a correct and right way for Kituwah People to conduct themselves to be fully human, to achieve full health and wellness (*tohi*), and maintain ones right to be a member of the Kituwah People. This principle entails self-respect and awareness of one’s responsibilities, and accountability to ourselves and the community. We learned that, in practice, this principle also embodies the expectation that each person, community, and organization is responsible to get themselves on the right path and to self-discipline to stay on that path. Maturity is demonstrated when each person or entity goes freely and willingly into their responsibilities and does not need to be told how to behave, and similarly, has sufficient self- awareness and discipline to step aside and get out of the way if they cannot or do not support the direction of the Kituwah wisdom and elders.
7. **Dikanwadvsvdi.** Our ancestors discovered natural laws of animal and plant behavior and intentionally built their human institutions to steward our lands and our People on those laws. Just as in the natural world, every Kituwah institution has a particular role, plays its role, and respects and appreciates the roles of others. For example, the Kituwah matrilineal institutions were the embodiment of the learned truth of women as the source of all life, of understanding the earth, and of healing. Similarly, each Kituwah town knew what land it was responsible for and its role in the social



and political system, and each Clan had a distinct role and responsibility in the tribal social and political system. This foundational focus on knowing and fulfilling your responsibility enabled equitable and decentralized stewardship where each institution, town or organization didn't work for each other but rather with each other. This system then enabled flexibility and resilience to change, as there was not gendered, or hierarchical, prejudice against new knowledge or ideas. Disputes arise when individuals or organizations do not fulfill their roles or responsibilities, or do not respect the responsibilities of others.

**Our Vision for Stewardship and Priorities for the Future:**

1. **Alenisodi Aligodi:** Regaining and fulfilling our responsibilities to our mountain homelands and our rights roles as a sovereign and matrilineal nation. This will entail actively promoting the understanding and adoption of our traditional knowledges, practices, and standards by all concerned with our homelands, the return to us of culturally significant lands, and establishing co-stewardship governance arrangements with the federal agencies currently holding responsibility for parts of our homelands and our non-human relatives. It will also entail actively encouraging the participation of our sister tribes, the Cherokee Nation, and the United Keetoowah Band, so that they too can rebuild their relationships and responsibilities with the plants, animals and sacred places of their homelands. It is essential to prioritize the restoration of the traditional roles of women as cherished healers and leaders in the stewardship of our Tribe and our earth, and support young women to take on these roles and encourage all men to recall and respect these roles.
2. **Duyugodvhi Yagvnedi:** Restoring our natural relatives and mountain homelands to health, and to provide the culturally important foods and materials that are essential to our wellbeing and happiness as a People. Given the extent of degradation, this restoration will require active engagement our People, with the support of all newcomers, to recover and apply the traditional cultivation, harvesting, cultural burning practices, and ensuring the suspension of culturally and environmentally abusive practices and policies such as strict old-growth protection zones and wilderness areas.
3. **Diniyotli Dideyodi.** Prioritizing our youth and their intimate engagement with and stewardship of our homelands. Our youth are our dreams and our future, yet because of the forced separation of the past they are often today disconnected from their language, lands, and traditions. It is our priority to advance programs and opportunities that enable a large portion of our youth to find meaningful connections with our natural relatives, as well as jobs, livelihoods, and career opportunities in the stewardship of the forests and waters across our homelands.
4. **Duyugodvhi Iyadvnedi.** Restoring our indigenous systems of science: monitoring, observation, research, and innovation. It is essential to develop new knowledge about the current status of our lands and relatives, and new ideas and approaches to restoring our lands and our People. Our People are best suited to identify the questions and lead the discovery of new environmental, social, and political solutions because of our deep history and intensely close relationships with the Kituwah lands. Encouraging, supporting, and empowering the next generation of Kituwah scholars and leaders will help ensure that together we have the knowledge and establish the institutions to confront the growing threats to our homelands from climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution of all types.

Through the restoration of our traditional land-relations, access, names, and the traditional rights and roles of women in particular, and by prioritizing our reconnection with the land by our youth, we will advance the health, wellness, and happiness for the Kituwah People as well as all others who reside here or downstream of our homelands. We invite all external partners to respect us and learn from us, as we will respect and learn from you, so we all can continue to be blessed with the opportunity to live among these Kituwah mountains for thousands of years to come.