

Summary of a workshop
sponsored by the
Yamózha Kúé Society
February 5-8, 2008

**TK Practitioners
Working Group**

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Our Responsibility to Keep the Land Alive

Toward a Framework for Traditional Knowledge Monitoring in the NWT

The Indigenous Way is the Starting Point

On February 5-8, a workshop took place to discuss a framework for using traditional knowledge (TK) to monitor changes on the land. The workshop was hosted by the Yellowknives Dene First Nation in the community of Ndilo. Participants were experienced TK research and monitoring practitioners from four of the five regions of the NWT. This was the first gathering of its kind in over ten years.

The workshop was a chance to share experiences and methods in TK monitoring, and to talk about the most important priorities for monitoring.

People at the workshop agreed that as harvesters in their traditional territories, indigenous peoples have always monitored the land. People understand changes by comparing their own experiences with what they know about the past, from their parents and grandparents.

If people stop going out on the land, they are no longer monitoring. This can happen because the wildlife have gone away, or because there are changes in the community that mean people are

losing their traditional culture and skills. The well-being of indigenous peoples is connected to the health of the environment. So TK monitoring includes land and people.

The indigenous way of experiencing the land is the starting point for TK monitoring. This way of monitoring needs to be recognized, understood, and supported. TK monitoring is part of what indigenous people do to take care of the land, and make good decisions about the land. This is more important than ever now that there is a lot of development happening in the NWT.

“Everything is connected together. The land is connected. You’re connected to the land. Animals, you have a connection to the animals.”
–Jane Modeste



What We Can Aim For

There are many challenges to creating a framework for TK monitoring. Science has come to be seen as the only valid way of monitoring. Indigenous communities do not have strong support for monitoring the land in the traditional way. People are struggling to maintain their languages and their knowledge of how to survive on the land.

Nowadays people need new resources and skills to be able to preserve and share TK. But

funding for this is short term, and not enough. In the words of Antoine Michel, “They give us just enough funding to fail.”

A strong TK framework will address these challenges. Long term funding and technical support are necessary to keep programs going. Communities and regions need to design and lead their own monitoring programs. They should decide what information is important to share with others—and how it should be

shared. Strong policies and governance are important tools to prevent misuse of TK.

TK monitoring is not straightforward or easy in the modern world. But this way of understanding changes can support community goals in capacity-building and governance. It can also contribute to developing strong land use plans to ensure that the land is protected for future generations.



Monitoring: A Matter of Survival

Indigenous people use the stories of the elders together with experiences on the land to observe changes that have happened since ancient times when giants roamed the earth. Harvesters share their experiences in various places with each other so that they can understand changes happening in their entire territory and beyond. For them, this is a matter of survival. They use any information that comes their way, including scientific information. And they focus on relationships between people, animals, and the land—including spiritual places. This holistic way of understanding change is known by scientists as “cumulative impact monitoring.”

This is what scientists wish they could do better, as a basis for making resource management decisions. Strong TK monitoring practices show that the relationship between the land and the people remains strong, and the needs of future generations are being taken care of.

Building a TK Monitoring Framework

The February workshop was the second step toward building a framework for TK monitoring in the NWT. The first step was a report on best practices based on a review of various northern experiences in monitoring. This report, and the full workshop report with many quotes and stories from the TK practitioners, are available from NWT CIMP (www.nwtcimp.ca). The workshop identified three action priorities: preserving the elders’ knowledge; strengthening tools for documenting indigenous language, especially place names; and making the maps and other information from the Dene Nation mapping project accessible to the communities.

There is also more work to be done in completing a TK monitoring framework. The TK Practitioners Working Group would like to continue working together to prepare recommendations for review and discussion in their regions and communities.

“In order to preserve my little spot of land a lot of work has to be done now.”
—Jonas Antoine



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