

**Final Report of the Anishinabek Knowledge Component
National First Nations Environmental Contaminants Program (NFNECP)
Health Canada**

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**Asubpeechoseewagong Netum Anishinabek (ANA), Wabauskang First
Nation (WFN), and Wabaseemoong Independent Nation**

2008-2009

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Executive Summary

For Anishinabek communities in northwestern Ontario, the traditional foodway still plays an important role in the political, cultural, spiritual, social and economic life of the people. Despite continued and severe environmental destruction caused by unmitigated industrial development, these practices remain strong and continue to contribute to the health and wellbeing of local communities. Like other Indigenous Peoples across Canada however, Elders in the communities of Asubeechoseewagong Netum Anishinabek (ANA), Wabauskang First Nation (WFN), and Wabaseemoong Independent Nation (WIN) are concerned about the impact that environmental degradation is having on their traditional foods, as they have witnessed several changes in the quantity and quality of wild meat over the past 30 years. In 2004-2005, ANA and WFN received funding from the NFNECP to begin investigating community concerns regarding contamination in traditional foods, sediments and crayfish from both western scientific and Indigenous Knowledge perspectives. As part of the 2004-2005 study, an Anishinabek methodology was used to investigate the impact of environmental contamination on the two communities from the perspective of the Elders. Younger community members, including several classes from the local high school, attended a two-day Anishinabek Knowledge workshop in order to hear the Elders' perspectives first hand. The Elders identified a number of key issues important to understanding contamination from an Anishinabek perspective over the course of the workshop. The Elders:

- Identified a link between healthy land, water, plants, animals and humans;
- Spoke at length about the "good life", life before it was disrupted by environmental destruction and colonial forces;
- Listed food items they traditionally ate that lead to good health;
- Spoke about changes in the quantity and quality of traditional foods; and,
- Shared with the researchers the impact of mercury contamination on the community from physical, emotional, spiritual and mental perspectives.

In 2008-2009, the same research team set out to build upon the results of the 2004-2005 Anishinabek component by holding a second two-day workshop. Using a similar methodology, the results of the 2008-2009 Elders workshop are as follows:

- Elders still believe that the consumption of traditional foods is important in maintaining the health and wellness of individuals and communities;
- Environmental contamination is having a detrimental impact on the health and wellness of people, plants, animals, the land and the waterways within the territories of these three communities;
- The underlying causes of contamination must be addressed in order for any real and lasting solutions to emerge;

- Scientists should be honest about the limitations of science in addressing environmental contamination and human health-related issues, particularly in Indigenous contexts;
- Text-based consumption guidelines are a culturally inappropriate way of communicating potential risk to Indigenous communities;
- Government personnel and scientists must be willing to engage in long term face-to-face knowledge sharing workshops in order to learn more about Anishinabek systems of monitoring and to communicate risk from a scientific perspective;
- Government personnel and scientists must be willing to acknowledge the authority of local Indigenous Elders and respect them as experts in the same way as western scientists; and
- Settler governments must acknowledge Indigenous perspectives on contamination as a symptom of the larger colonial project, rather than a problem that can be solved by not consuming particular food items.

Introduction: A Lifeway that Comes from the Land

For Anishinabek people, the traditional foodway¹ is embedded in the physical, spiritual, political, social and cultural spheres of the Anishinabek way of life. Taking care of the land and its inhabitants is a cornerstone of Anishinabek environmental thought, and the foundation of our legal traditions, governance, and spiritual practice. Similarly, traditional foodways are the base of Anishinabek economies, providing nutritious foods to families based on an intimate connection to the local environment, the ethics of reciprocity, subsistence, sustainability, and gifting to equitably redistribute “wealth”². In terms of health and wellness, the Anishinabek foodway is an integral part of traditional health care, with many Elders recognizing traditional foods as the first defense against disease and illness. In short, traditional foodways were and continued to be a critical aspect in maintaining health and wellness for Anishinabek individuals, families and communities.

For Anishinabek communities in northwestern Ontario, the traditional foodway still plays an important role in the political, cultural, spiritual, social and economic life of the people. Despite the dispossession of their lands and the severe environmental destruction caused by unmitigated industrial development, these practices remain strong. Like other Indigenous Peoples across Canada, however, Elders in the communities of Asubpeeschoseewagong Netum Anishinabek (ANA), Wabauskang First Nation (WFN), and Wabaseemoong Independent Nation (WIN)³ are concerned about the impact environmental degradation is having on their traditional foodways, as they have recorded a decline in the quantity and quality of wild meat over the past 30 years. During

¹ I am using the term “foodway” here to recognize and emphasize that this system involves more than just the harvesting and consumption of “food items”. Rather, a “foodway” is a complex system embedded in the language, culture, traditions and way of life of Indigenous Peoples. As such, it contributes to the social, emotional and cultural well-being of the people. The ritual and ceremonies involved in the foodway contribute to the spiritual well-being of the people, and practicing this way of life contributes to the development and maintenance of healthy Anishinabek identities and communities. Traditional foodways are also an important part of Indigenous economic and political systems. In short, foodways connect people to the land in a web of reciprocal relationships.

² There are no single words in English that accurately convey the ethic of “taking only what you need” (sustainability?), “using everything you take” (subsistence?), and the complex mechanisms of gifting and sharing used within Anishinabek culture and other Indigenous cultures to redistribute wealth amongst community members.

³ ANA is a community located about 80 km northeast of Kenora, in northwestern Ontario, with an on-reserve population of about 700. WIN is adjacent to ANA and has an on-reserve population of about 800 and WFN is a community of about 90 on-reserve members located 120 km northwest of Dryden, Ontario.

this time period, several serious, long-term health issues have also emerged and plagued community members, with many people believing these issues to be directly related to the environmental destruction occurring within their national territory.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the English-Wabigoon River system was severely contaminated with inorganic mercury⁴. The point source of the contamination was a pulp mill located upstream in Dryden, Ontario. The people of all three communities have been coping with the devastating impact of this contamination for the past 30 years in terms of their individual and collective health and wellness, and the health and wellness of the lands and waters within their national territory. The community of Wabauskang was never officially informed of the contamination; they have received no compensation from any governments and the first study they participated in regarding the lingering impacts of the contamination was the study completed by this research group in 2004-2005.

From the perspective of the Elders, the health of the land - meaning the health of the plants, animals, rivers, soil and the ecological integrity of the environment - is intimately and intrinsically connected to the health and well-being of human communities⁵. Indigenous Elders are known for taking a very long-term view of ecological issues⁶, for their precaution in assessing potential impacts on the environment⁷ and for taking a holistic view of health and wellness⁸. Community members also believe that they are intrinsically connected to the land and waters, such that when the land is sick, the people will also become sick⁹. From this perspective, imbalance and disease in both an individual and collective sense stems from the disruption of their proper relationship to the land as a result of both the dispossession of their lands and the industrial resource extraction-pollution complex.

⁴ Winona LaDuke 1999, *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life*, Boston, Sound End Press, 101-103.

⁵ Michael McDonald, L. Arragutiainaw and S. Novalinga eds. 1997, *Voices from the Bay: Traditional Ecological Knowledge of Inuit and Cree in the Hudson Bay Bioregion*. CARC, Ottawa, 5-6, 57-58; *Words That Come Before All Else*, Haudenosaunee Environmental Task Force, N.D.; Winona LaDuke 1999, *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life*, Boston, Sound End Press, 1-2.

⁶ Peter Knudston and D. Suzuki 1992, *Wisdom of the Elders*, Stoddard, Toronto, ON.

⁷ Peter Knudston and D. Suzuki 1992, *Wisdom of the Elders*, Stoddard, Toronto, ON.

⁸ D.A. Long and T. Fox 1996, "Circle of Healing: Illness, Healing and Health Among Aboriginal People in Canada", D.A. Long and O. P. Dickason, eds. *Visions of the Heart: Canadian Aboriginal Issues*, Harcourt Brace, Toronto, ON.

⁹ L.R. Simpson, 2001, *Socio-Cultural Pilot Project Technical Report May 2001*, EAGLE Project, available online at <http://chiefs-of-ontario.org/PageContent/Default.aspx?SectionID=2&SectionHeadlineID=25>, accessed May 5, 2009.

The people of ANA, WIN and WFN rely upon traditional foods to make up a substantial portion of their diet, and to contribute to the cultural, emotional, social and spiritual well-being of their families, communities and their nation. Elders and traditional land users have become increasingly concerned regarding the quality and quantity of traditional foods over the past 30 years, as they have documented several changes within their own Anishinabek monitoring system. Elders and local Anishinabek Knowledge holders believe the impacts of relocation, residential schools, pulp mill effluent, hydro-electric development, intensive deforestation, the application of insecticides and pesticides and the disregard for their Treaty and Aboriginal Rights contributes to disease and illness in individuals and the communities as a whole¹⁰.

Elders in the three communities take a holistic view of health and wellness, and to them, being healthy and living a good life means much more than just the absence of disease. Elders believe that people must live a balanced life spiritually, physically, mentally and emotionally. Being out on the land, with family, harvesting traditional foods and practicing their culture contributes to the wellness of individuals and communities by balancing the physical, social and emotional aspects of health. Participating in the traditional foodway enables Anishinabek people to remain connected to their traditional lands, to renew the ceremonies, songs and dances associated with harvesting, and to strengthen healthy relationships between extended family members¹¹. In addition to these benefits, according to the local community Elders, consuming traditional foods also contributes positively to the physical health of individuals and communities, as these foods are of a high nutritional value. But Elders and community members are also concerned about the quantity and quality of the traditional foods they consume, especially in relation to the environmental destruction occurring on their territories.

¹⁰ L.R. Simpson 2005, *Academic Report on the Indigenous Knowledge Workshop, Grassy Narrows and Wabauskang First Nations*, Prepared for National First Nations Environmental Contaminants Program, Ottawa, ON; L.R. Simpson 2004, "Anti-Colonial Strategies for the Recovery and Maintenance of Indigenous Knowledge" *American Indian Quarterly* 28(3/4):373-385; L.R. Simpson 2003, "Toxic Contamination Undermining Indigenous Food Systems and Indigenous Sovereignty", *Pimatiziwin: A Journal of Aboriginal And Indigenous Community Health* Volume 1(2):129-135; L.R. Simpson, 2001, *Socio-Cultural Pilot Project Technical Report May 2001*, EAGLE Project, available online at <http://chiefs-of-ontario.org/PageContent/Default.aspx?SectionID=2&SectionHeadlineID=25>, accessed May 5, 2009.

¹¹ L.R. Simpson 2003, "Toxic Contamination Undermining Indigenous Food Systems and Indigenous Sovereignty", *Pimatiziwin: A Journal of Aboriginal And Indigenous Community Health* Volume 1(2):129-135; L.R. Simpson, 2001, *Socio-Cultural Pilot Project Technical Report May 2001*, EAGLE Project, available online at <http://chiefs-of-ontario.org/PageContent/Default.aspx?SectionID=2&SectionHeadlineID=25>, accessed May 5, 2009.

There exists relatively little in the academic literature on the impacts of environmental contamination from the perspective of the Elders¹². Several researchers have noted that Indigenous Peoples believe the consumption of traditional foods is important in maintaining good health,¹³ but little is published regarding the perception and conceptualization of contamination within Indigenous Knowledge systems, and much of the published work that has been done is with Inuit communities in the Arctic. In the southern regions of Canada, virtually no research has been conducted on how best to evaluate concerns regarding the consumption of traditional foods, the impact of existing consumption guidelines, and the best way to communicate information regarding contamination to Indigenous communities. This is taking place to a greater extent in the Arctic, primarily because much more energy and resources have gone into evaluating the safety and nutritional value of traditional foods, and to communicating the results of these efforts to local Inuit communities¹⁴.

In 2004-2005, ANA and Wabauskang First Nation received funding from the NFNECP to begin investigating community concerns regarding contamination in traditional foods, sediments and crayfish from western scientific and Indigenous Knowledge perspectives. As part of the 2004-2005 study, we undertook an Anishinabek Knowledge workshop to investigate the impact of environmental contamination on the two communities from the perspective of the Elders. Younger community members, including several classes from the local high school, attended the workshop in order to hear the Elders' perspectives first hand. The Elders identified a number of key issues important

¹²L.R. Simpson 2003, "Toxic Contamination Undermining Indigenous Food Systems and Indigenous Sovereignty", *Pimatiziwin: A Journal of Aboriginal And Indigenous Community Health* Volume 1(2):129-135, and L.R. Simpson, 2001, *Socio-Cultural Pilot Project Technical Report May 2001*, EAGLE Project, available online at <http://chiefs-of-ontario.org/PageContent/Default.aspx?SectionID=2&SectionHeadlineID=25>, accessed May 5, 2009.

¹³ O. Receveur, N. Kassi, H.M. Chan, P.R. Berti, H.V. Kuhnlein 1998, *Yukon First Nations' Assessment of Dietary Benefit/Risk*, Centre for Indigenous Peoples' Nutrition and Environment, McGill University, Montreal, QC; M. McDonald, L. Arragutiainaw and S. Novalinga, eds. 1997, *Voices from the Bay: Traditional Ecological Knowledge of Inuit and Cree in the Hudson Bay Bioregion*. CARC, Ottawa, ON; D.A. Long and T. Fox 1996, "Circle of Healing: Illness, Healing and Health Among Aboriginal People in Canada", D.A. Long and O. P. Dickason, eds. *Visions of the Heart: Canadian Aboriginal Issues*, Harcourt Brace, Toronto, ON; H.L. Kuhnlein 1993, "Global Nutrition and the Holistic Environment of Indigenous Peoples", *The Path to Healing: Report of the National Round Table on Aboriginal Health and Social Issues*, Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services, 251-264.

¹⁴ Heather Myers and Chris Furgal 2006 "Long-Range Transport of Information: Are Arctic Residents Getting the Message about Contaminants", *Arctic* 59:1, 47-60; Chris Furgal, S. Powell, and H. Myers 2005, "Digesting the Message about Contaminants in the Canadian North: Review and Recommendations for Future Research and Action" *Arctic* 58(2):103-114.

to understanding contamination from an Anishinabek perspective over a two-day workshop held in March 2005. The Elders:

- Identified a link between healthy land, water, plants, animals and humans;
- Spoke at length about the “good life”, life before it was disrupted by environmental destruction and colonial forces;
- Listed food items they traditionally ate that lead to good health;
- Spoke about changes in the quantity and quality of traditional foods;
- Shared with the researchers the impact of the mercury contamination on the community from physical, emotional, spiritual and mental perspectives¹⁵.

The issues the Elders of ANA and WFN identified in our first study in 2005 were similar to the themes identified by the Effects on Aboriginals from the Great Lakes Environment (EAGLE) project. They included emphasizing the cultural and social importance of harvesting traditional foods in addition to their superior nutritional value; utilizing a broad view of “contamination” to include encroachment, disregarded treaty rights, the suppression of Indigenous governance, and other practices linked to colonialism; and linking community health to the health and integrity of the environment¹⁶. As a result of our first workshop and the identified gaps in the academic literature, the Elders asked for another two-day workshop in 2008-2009.

Objectives

The objectives of the 2008-2009 Anishinabek Knowledge component were to:

- Investigate how Elders conceptualize and define contamination within Anishinabek Knowledge;
- Discuss the concept of “safe” levels of contamination in wild foods from an Anishinabek perspective;
- Document why Elders believe the consumption of traditional foods is important;
- Explore links between contamination and other environmental issues the community is facing;

¹⁵ L.R. Simpson 2005, *Academic Report on the Indigenous Knowledge Workshop, Grassy Narrows and Wabauskang First Nations*, Prepared for National First Nations Environmental Contaminants Program, Ottawa, ON.

¹⁶ L.R. Simpson, 2001, *Socio-Cultural Pilot Project Technical Report May 2001*, EAGLE Project, available online at <http://chiefs-of-ontario.org/PageContent/Default.aspx?SectionID=2&SectionHeadlineID=25>, accessed May 5, 2009.

- Propose culturally appropriate and inherent ways of dealing with the perceived levels of contamination present in the territories of ANA and Wabauskang; and to
- Discuss why community members largely ignore consumption guidelines for the consumption of fish produced by the Ontario Ministry of the Environment (OMOE).

Methodological Considerations: An Anishinabek Research Process

Responsible Indigenous Knowledge research must abide by the intellectual traditions and research protocols of local people and it must approach the subject matter in a manner that neither further colonizes the participants or their knowledge. The methodology for this project was developed and operationalized *with* the Elders of Asubpeechoseewagong Netum Anishinabek, Wabaseemong Independent Nation and Wabauskang First Nation, and the community research assistants. Elders were consulted as to the best way to proceed and made decisions throughout this component of the project relating to all aspects of the research process, the development of research questions, the procedure and the methodology. This work required placing culturally inherent Anishinabek ways of knowing at the centre. The research team respected these Anishinabek intellectual traditions by conducting the workshop in Anishinabemowin, by using a Sharing Circle and other forms of Anishinabek Knowledge transmission, by respecting the Oral Tradition, by turning to the Elders when procedural decisions had to be made, and by recognizing and employing Anishinabek ethics procedures, consent procedures and methods of validating knowledge. In addition, the project also required an Indigenist and decolonizing approach to the research. Indigenist or decolonizing methodologies contain a wide variety of evolving methods and strategies predicated on privileging Indigenous voices, approaches, ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies¹⁷. This approach is most necessary in Indigenous Knowledge research because this knowledge is part of a large, comprehensive (and poorly understood from a western perspective) system of knowledge, every bit as complex as western science. Elders in this type of knowledge system are considered to be experts. Their expertise must be respected, and their decision-making power nurtured.

¹⁷ Lester I. Rigney 1999, "Internationalization of an Indigenous Anticolonial Cultural Critique of Research Methodologies: A Guide to Indigenist Research Methodology and Its Principles", *Wicazo Sa* 14(2):109-120; Linda Tuhiwai Smith 1999, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* Zed Books, London; Kiera Ladner 2000, *When Buffalo Speaks: Creating An Alternative Understanding of Traditional Blackfoot Governance*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Political Science, Carleton University, Ottawa, ON; and L. R. Simpson 2004, "Anti-Colonial Strategies for the Recovery and Maintenance of Indigenous Knowledge", *American Indian Quarterly*, 28(3/4):373-385.

After the Elders had been initially consulted regarding how the research should proceed, Judy DaSilva (ANA), Anthony Henry (WIN) and Betty Riffel (WFN) invited community Elders individually to attend a two-day workshop to discuss the impact of environmental contamination on their lands from their own perspective. At these initial meetings, the project was explained to the Elders in detail, including what kinds of information they would be asked to comment on, how the information would be translated, recorded and used, and how the final report would be written. Elders that agreed with this process attended the workshop held in ANA on March 23 and 24, 2009, those that did not consent to this format, chose not to attend. Unfortunately there was a freezing raining warning in Wabauskang, and the Elders from this community could not travel to attend the meeting. The gathering had already been moved from the previous fall as a result of Elders deaths in the three communities, and therefore could not be rescheduled again. This was unfortunate, but it was necessary to continue the workshop with Elders from the two available communities¹⁸.

During the opening of the meeting, information pertaining to consent was presented to the Elders once again. According to Anishinabek intellectual traditions, those Elders that agreed or gave their consent, stayed and participated¹⁹. It is important to note that this ethical procedure for informed consent relied upon respect for the traditions and customs of the Elders themselves, and this procedure allowed researchers to obtain informed consent in accordance with Anishinabek research protocols²⁰. The Elders were then invited to speak in the manner they chose to be most appropriate. A series of questions based on the research objectives were read out so that the participants were aware of the kinds of information the research team was seeking. Elders were asked to comment on the following questions:

1. What does contamination mean from an Anishinabek perspective?
2. Are there safe levels of contamination?
3. Why is eating Traditional Food important?
4. How should we deal with the contamination in our territory?
5. How is contamination linked to clear cutting, hydro-electric development, pesticide spraying and the other environmental issues we are facing?
6. Why don't people follow the MOE guidelines for eating fish?

¹⁸ Our over-all numbers were smaller than we originally proposed because a number of Elders in the three communities had died since the first workshop in 2005.

¹⁹ Elders that did not agree were free to leave in accordance with local Anishinabek traditions or participate as observers. None left.

²⁰ We did not rely on a written information/consent forms because such forms are often viewed with suspicion and distrust, to the extent that many traditional people will not participate in the research because they view reliance on written documentation as indicating the researcher and their project are unreliable and untrustworthy. Informed consent was obtained in an oral manner as explained above, according to community cultural traditions.

Elders took turns speaking in a Sharing Circle, speaking in Anishinabemowin (the Ojibwe language). Three recorders recorded via paper and pencil (Elders are not comfortable with any kinds of technology being used during this process including video cameras, tape recorders, laptop computers) any information that related directly to the objectives of the research. Two recorders used translators because they were not fluent Anishinabemowin speakers. This process continued until the research participants told the research team that they were finished. The research team thanked the participants and the meeting was closed following cultural protocols. The names of individuals participating in the Indigenous Knowledge Workshop were not recorded, and comments recorded were not attributed to individual participants in order to protect their anonymity.

Findings and Discussion

In general, Elders commented on the first five questions relating to contamination, health and their traditional territory in an integrated fashion relaying stories about how they were raised on the land by their parents and grandparents, how healthy they were living a traditional lifestyle, how happy their families were harvesting and eating traditional foods, and how good life was before contamination and colonial imposition (which according to them is part of "contamination"). They discussed environmental contamination broadly, speaking of issues related to residential schools, encroachment and the disregard for treaty rights in addition to environmental issues. They reiterated that there is no "safe" level of contamination, that all levels of contamination indicate an imbalance and a disruption of the relationship between people and the land. This mirrored and enhanced the results reported in the 2005 workshop²¹. The following two quotes from Elders during the 2009 workshop exemplify these perspectives:

"The way the people lived and how they ate was how I was shown to eat. I was shown how to respect everything. We always show respect for all living life on the land"²².

"My parents spoke the language all the time. We worked hard getting water in those days. We went blueberry picking and sold the berries during berry season. Rice harvesting was done in September. I watched my parents how they processed rice. It was a lot of work picking rice and preparing it. After rice season in October they would hunt and start trapping for winter furs. My dad told me to watch how he did things and I would learn by

²¹ Simpson, L.R., 2005, *Academic Report on the Indigenous Knowledge Workshop, Grassy Narrows and Wabauskang First Nations*, Prepared for National First Nations Environmental Contaminants Program, Ottawa, ON.

²² Elder quote from the Elders Gathering, March 23-24, 2009, held at Asubpeeschoseewagong Netum Anishinabek.

watching him. That's how I learned to do things. Water was good in the English River. There were a lot of trees that time. The moose and deer were healthy"²³.

The Elders spoke at length regarding the importance of a traditional diet in maintaining good health, even in contemporary times, even given the contamination within their waters and lands. They explicitly cited the absence of colonial diseases such as cancer and diabetes in the times when their traditional foods system was strong.

"How we eat gives us diabetes. Eating wild meat is good for you. Moose, ducks and animals. How they were prepared made us healthy. All traditional food was healthy. It was prepared in a special way that made it good to eat. Before kids were born it was important to eat healthy. ... Breastfeeding was the healthiest choice. I was breastfed and I am reasonably healthy."²⁴

"Whitedog [Wabaseamong] is right about eating traditional foods. We never heard of diabetes or high blood pressure when we ate good. We were given medicines to help us. ... Traditional food in the past served us well. Today's foods are not good. We have to think that way."²⁵

"Traditional food is the best choice for eating. Animals eat medicines and we eat the medicines what the animals ate. It is good for us. The moose and the muskrat for instance eat a lot of medicines. They are good to eat. My parents all ate traditional food. Today the foods give us sore hearts and sore kidneys. We have to go back to the food the Creator gave us and the animals provided us to eat. That's the old way and it was better."²⁶

During the second day of the workshop, Elders focused nearly exclusively on the issue of consumption guidelines, and specifically why community members are reluctant to follow them. These perspectives are discussed in more detail below.

²³ Elder quote from the Elders Gathering, March 23-24, 2009, held at Asubpeeschoseewagong Netum Anishinabek.

²⁴ Elder quote from the Elders Gathering, March 23-24, 2009, held at Asubpeeschoseewagong Netum Anishinabek.

²⁵ Elder quote from the Elders Gathering, March 23-24, 2009, held at Asubpeeschoseewagong Netum Anishinabek.

²⁶ Elder quote from the Elders Gathering, March 23-24, 2009, held at Asubpeeschoseewagong Netum Anishinabek.

The Elders' Perspectives on Consumption Guidelines

Because consumption guidelines for fish²⁷ already exist in the three communities, and our understanding was that few community members followed the guidelines²⁸, the research team was interested in learning the Elders' perspective on this type of risk management approach. We were also interested in learning if the Elders had been consulted with regards to the establishment of these guidelines, their level of awareness with respect to the guidelines and the specific reasons they felt communities were not following these advisories. To this end, we asked the Elders to comment on these issues during the second day of the workshop. Their responses were revealing and lengthy, taking up the majority of the workshop for day two. In considering these responses in the context of the academic literature, several themes emerged which can be broken down into two basic responses. First, the risks and benefits of consuming traditional foods from a western scientific perspective are often not appropriately communicated to Indigenous communities *in a manner that is culturally sensitive*. This includes two aspects that will be discussed in more detail below – the first is related to the uncertain nature of western science, and how scientists have interacted (or not interacted) with community members in the past. The second aspect of this is related to the use of text-based resources to communicate risk. The second basic response was a deepening of our understanding of how contamination is conceptualized by Anishinabek people. This is discussed at length beginning on page 18 of this report.

Communicating Potential Risk

Contaminants researchers Heather Myers and Chris Furgal, in their paper "Long-Range Transport of Information: Are Arctic Residents Getting the Message about Contaminants", discuss various reasons residents of Inuit communities are not adhering to established consumption guidelines for their Traditional Foods. The Northern Contaminants Program (NCP) has put a substantial amount of resources into communicating risk to these communities, yet it is clear from this scientific evaluation that this message is not impacting the behaviour of local people. Furgal and Myers discuss several reasons for this that also apply to Anishinabek communities – language and terminology barriers, the reliance on print media for communication of risk, and the nature of science itself. Furgal and Myers write:

²⁷ These guidelines are produced by the Ontario Ministry of the Environment (OMEO).

²⁸ Evidence of this was also found in a previous study funded by the NFNECP in Treaty 3 conducted by Laurie Chan. Chan et al found that people were consuming fish without regard to OMOE guidelines. See L. Chan, P. Solomon and A. Kinghorn 2004, "Our Waters, Our Fish, Our People: Mercury Contamination in Fish Resources of Two Treaty #3 Communities, Unpublished research report, available on line at <http://www.gct3.net/wp-content/uploads/2008/01/final-report-hg-project.pdf>, accessed April 30, 2009.

“The problem is not simply the terminology: the science itself is uncertain and constantly improving, so that new compounds are often identified, and ever smaller amounts can be measured with increasingly precise equipment.”²⁹

The uncertain nature of science, and the fact that it is constantly improving creates confusion amongst communities that already mistrust scientists. In the past, too many scientists have gone into Anishinabek communities with definitive answers to contaminants issues, when in reality it is exceedingly difficult for science to evaluate the full impact of all the potential industrial chemicals community members might be exposed to over time through the consumption of traditional foods and various other pathways of exposure. At this point in time science simply does not have a full understanding of how industrial chemicals behave in the environment and impact human health, particularly over the long term.

In the specific case of the three communities involved in this study, scientists from government agencies and academic institutions have been visiting the communities for over 30 years. Initially, scientists told community members that the mercury would be out of the ecosystem in 30 years and that potential health impacts would be minimal and confined to one generation. Time has proven these promises to be false, leading many in the communities to be suspicious of scientists and research in general. People feel that scientists have never taken their concerns seriously, that scientists have never had the communities’ best interests in mind, and that scientists are more concerned with their own research agendas than the needs of the communities. In addition to these circumstances, many different scientists have visited these communities often with conflicting professional opinions regarding the impact of mercury contamination on the health and wellness of the communities. While debate and disagreement are part of any scientific pursuit, this uncertainty leads to further mistrust in the Anishinabek community.

Culturally Appropriate Communication of Potential Guidelines

In our study, Elders responded in the following manner when asked about why community members were reluctant to follow existing OMOE guidelines for the consumption of fish:

“Fish guidelines? I didn’t see one! I didn’t see those guidelines.”³⁰

²⁹ Heather Myers and Chris Furgal, “Long-Range Transport of Information: Are Arctic Residents Getting the Message about Contaminants”, *Arctic* 59:1 (March 2006), 49.

³⁰ Elder quote from the Elders Gathering, March 23-24, 2009, held at Asubpeeschoseewagong Netum Anishinabek.

"I was brought up and taught to eat fish by my parents. Fish is good food, brain food. I believe they tell us lies so they can get at our wood and wild game."³¹

"I remember seeing the fish eating guidelines. That was long time ago when they showed us those. Some time during the late 70's is what I remember. I can recall them telling us what type of fish was safe to eat and the sizes of fish to eat. Some fish were bad to eat and we were not to eat those. From what I can recall, the big fish were not good to eat cause they might carry a lot of mercury contamination. Those guidelines taught a lot about that. I haven't seen those guidelines used or spoken of since then. Maybe that's why people are not following the guidelines cause they are not around. That was long time ago when they were spoken of"³².

The Elders indicated that one of the primary reasons people were not following the guidelines was that they did not know about them, in essence the communication of potential risk from consuming fish was not carried out in a meaningful or culturally appropriate manner. The OMOE's guidelines are produced in a yearly guidebook, published in English, and distributed by a government that is not Anishinabek. For the most part, the Elders were completely unaware of these guidelines, and many were remembering initial meetings that took place regarding the consumption of freshwater fish in the wake of the mercury contamination over thirty years ago. Since there is an obvious concern about contamination of fish in the community, it is logical that people would be interested in reading guide booklets if they were made available or accessible. However, many of the Elders do not speak or read English, and they do not read Anishinabemowin³³. For this reason, any text-based production of consumption guidelines is inadequate for older community members. The only way to reach this segment of the population is through face-to-face meetings, and this is a critical point because the Elders have considerable influence within families. Elders who attend workshops on consumption guidelines are more likely to tell their children (grandparents and parents) to read the guidelines. This face-to-face approach is far more culturally appropriate than text-based guidelines and would ensure a greater awareness of existing guidelines at the community level³⁴. While the scientific results of our study coincide with the Elders' assessment that traditional foods (with the exception of

³¹ Elder quote from the Elders Gathering, March 23-24, 2009, held at Asubpeeschoseewagong Netum Anishinabek.

³² Elder quote from the Elders Gathering, March 23-24, 2009, held at Asubpeeschoseewagong Netum Anishinabek.

³³ Anishinabemowin is an oral language that has only recently been textualized.

³⁴ *C.f.* Heather Myers and Chris Furgal, "Long-Range Transport of Information: Are Arctic Residents Getting the Message about Contaminants", *Arctic* 59:1(March 2006),48-50.

certain species of fish from certain locations) are healthy and “safe”³⁵ for community members to eat, the Elders’ clearly indicated a need for more *dialogue* between the government agencies responsible for existing fish consumption guidelines.

One assumption that researchers, scientists and government agencies consistently make about Indigenous communities and Indigenous intellectual traditions relating to the environment is that there are no guidelines or protocols for harvesting and consuming traditional foods within Indigenous Knowledge systems, and that Indigenous Knowledge holders have no mechanisms within Indigenous Knowledge systems to assess the safety of traditional foods. This assumption is discussed further below because not only is it inaccurate, but it is also a substantial barrier to developing communication models that are culturally sensitive and meaningful to Indigenous communities.

Existing Anishinabek Monitoring Systems

It is rarely if ever acknowledged that Anishinabek peoples have their own culturally inherent systems of monitoring their environment, including the safe and ethical harvesting of traditional foods³⁶. Anishinabek Elders often refer to this system as part of the much larger Bimaadiziwin³⁷ – a series of processes, values, ethics and laws, that ensure communities members are living the “good life” by relating to the land and to each other in a good way. These processes are still operating in Anishinabek communities, they are overseen by the Elders. If there is a need for consumption guidelines based on science, to be meaningful, these guidelines must be integrated into existing Anishinabek monitoring systems.

The Elders are considered to be the leaders and Knowledge Holders in Anishinabek communities, so they must be an integral part of any communication plan. Without the support of Elders, there is little hope that community members will see the benefit in following fish consumption guidelines. To foster this kind of support however, would require government personnel to engage in meaningful, on-going consultation with the Elders in a culturally appropriate, or rather a culturally *inherent* manner. Government personnel must be willing to foster long-term relationships with the Elders based on mutual respect. Elders must be respected as experts and as legitimate Knowledge Holders, of the same status as western scientists. Government personnel would have to listen to and acknowledge the perspectives of Elders, and rather than “knowledge dissemination” in a didactic sense, the interaction would have to be conceptualized and actualized as “knowledge sharing”.

³⁵ The Elders indicated in 2005 that from their perspective there is no “safe” level of contamination. This is similar to other Indigenous Peoples, including the Maori. Personal Communication, Dr. Jamie Ataria (Ecotoxicologist, Landscape Research, New Zealand), October 29, 2009, Trent University, Peterborough, ON.

³⁶ Personal Communication Kimlee Wong (Anishinabek contaminants researcher, Winnipeg, MB), March 26, 2009.

³⁷ Translated as the good life, or as “continuous rebirth”.

The Elders must also be respected as decision-makers³⁸. So once government personnel had shared their perspectives, the Elders must be left to decide how best to proceed – to decide whether to embed the guidelines within existing Anishinabek systems or to continue to rely solely on their own knowledge as they have done in the past.

If government agencies are serious about communicating risk to Indigenous communities they must be prepared to invest the necessary resources to monitor contaminant levels in traditional foods including wild meat, which is not currently monitored even in severely contaminated areas. They must also be willing to integrate this information into the larger Anishinabek monitoring system. This means yearly meetings with Elders and with the broader community. It means an investment in culturally appropriate print material in Anishinabemowin and English, and it means further investment in collaborative communication methods based on consultation with Elders, community visits, face-to-face meetings and community workshops.

The second major theme that emerged in the workshop was regarding how contamination is viewed by the Elders and by Indigenous communities themselves. While scientist and researchers from outside Indigenous communities tend to frame the issue solely in terms of health and methods of reducing exposure through food choices, Indigenous Peoples see contamination as a symptom of a much larger problem. This difference in perception is discussed in the following section.

Indigenous Perspectives on Contamination

The second theme that emerged from the 2009 Elders workshop was a deepening of our understandings of contamination from the perspective of the Elders. The Elders believe that the contamination of traditional foods and the disruption of their traditional foodway is not in itself a *problem* that needs to be solved. For them, it is rather a *symptom* of a much larger crisis. The dispossession of their traditional lands, the subversion of their traditional forms of governance, and the forced imposition of the industrial resource extraction complex is at the very root of the problem. One way this larger issue expresses itself within their territory is in the form of rules and regulations made by federal and provincial governments. Where once Anishinabek hunters and trappers engaged in these activities according to Anishinabek legal traditions and culturally inherent “resource management regulations”, they are now harassed by conservation officers for moving within their territory, carrying guns, building trapping cabins, and in situations where the state’s harvesting rules and regulations conflict with Anishinabek laws and regulation, they are charged and convicted with violations³⁹. This reality sets the stage for the Anishinabek to view fish consumption guidelines imposed by the same governments as another

³⁸ This works best when Elders and Indian Act Chief and Councils work together.

³⁹ Stella Spak 2005, “The Position of Indigenous Knowledge in Canadian Co-management Organizations”, *Anthropologica* 47(2):233-247.

form of colonial control, regulation and harassment⁴⁰. From the perspective of the Elders, Settler society has illegally dispossessed them of their lands, destroyed much of the natural environment and contaminated their lands, waters and food. The response of Settler society to this colossal injustice is to produce consumption guidelines, further regulating and limiting the Anishinabek. This irony is not lost on the Elders.

From this perspective, until governments are willing to discuss the underlying causes of environmental destruction on Indigenous lands, it is unlikely that any real progress will be made with regards to preventing environmental contamination in Indigenous territories. Further, not following government-imposed guidelines represents a form of resistance to colonial control. Prominent Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred from the community of Kahnawá:ke echoes the Elders' perspectives in the following quote originally published in the *Eastern Door*:

"So, what's my future vision to make Kahnawá:ke a better place? With all this in mind, the answer is clear: we need to learn to appreciate our place in the natural world, to restore our traditional land and river-based culture, and to decolonize our diet so that our community has food security in the future.

The only obstacles to realizing this vision are psychological. Our separation from the natural environment and traditional foods has changed our tastes and our attitudes. How does eating a boiled eel for supper sound to you? People in Kahnawá:ke used to eat that all the time! I guess even more than re-adapting our tastes, fear is an issue. We've all been told for so long that the river and the land are polluted and that eating fish and things grown in the soil in this area are not good for you. Yet we trust and eat just about everything that's on the supermarket shelves or on the menu in restaurants. Do we really believe that eating a meal of sturgeon from the river is worse for our long term well-being than a plate of deep fried hormone laced chicken wings doused in salt and chemical flavourers?"⁴¹

Ultimately, the Elders, who still hold considerable influence in the three communities, believe that the consumption of traditional foods is better for the health and well-being of their families than the consumption of processed foods

⁴⁰ Elders Gathering, March 23-24, 2009, held at Asubpeeschoseewagong Netum Anishinabek.

⁴¹ This essay was part of a series entitled, "My Future Vision of Kahnawake," for publication in newspaper *The Eastern Door*. The series was commissioned by the Mohawk Council of Kahnawake, and asked notable Kahnawake Mohawks to share their thoughts on the future direction of the community. This quote is from Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred's contribution and is available online at <http://www.taiaiake.com/29>, accessed April 24, 2009.

from grocery stores in Kenora (and this is also supported by western science, at least for wild meat). They have little knowledge of and little trust in government-imposed consumption guidelines for fish. History and past experiences tell them that provincial and federal governments or government departments do not have the best interests of Indigenous Peoples in mind. The following two quotes are taken from two different Elders during the workshop:

“I eat fish, and I have never seen those guidelines, never. WHAT GUIDELINES? I have eaten fish all my life, and this has not changed. Natural Resources is always telling us what to eat and what not to eat. I don't believe their lies anymore. They are taking from us. They tell us lies, they tell us not to eat fish, the big fish, the animal's livers and entrails cause they may contain poison and might harm us. Yet they bring and allow the white man to hunt freely in our lands and to fish in our lands and we see them taking all of what they catch. Natural Resources, they are the problem. They lie to provide for the white man. They are not looking after our interests. I don't believe anything they have to say. I am tired of them questioning everything we do in our land. Eat this, don't eat that, this is bad for you, this good for you. Nothing much is good for us anymore according to the Natural Resources”.⁴²

The communities of ANA, WIN and WFN have experience two hundred years of colonial control. In the last 50 years, they have been relocated to facilitate hydro-electric development, their children have been forced into the residential school system, their traditional form of governance ignored, their treaty rights brushed aside in favour of the resource extraction industry, and their lands have been severely contaminated with mercury in addition to other chemicals in pulp mill effluent. In the eyes of the Anishinabek, these attacks on their culture, their lands and their people have been unmitigated by the federal and provincial governments, and while individual contaminants researchers and health departments may have the best of intentions, they are viewed as being within this colonial context, as lived by the people of ANA, WIN and WFN. Consumption guidelines are viewed as another form of control, and community members have no trust that government health officials have the best interests of Anishinabek people in mind.

“I remember them guidelines, I remember them telling us what fish were good to eat and which were not. I didn't listen to them, I eat fish anyways. Everything I caught in my net or what I caught I ate it. I feel fine. A friend of mine asked my why I didn't listen to them guidelines. I told him, it's for certain that someday I am going to die, eating fish or not. So if I am going to

⁴² Elder quote from the Elders Gathering, March 23-24, 2009, held at Asubpeeschoseewagong Netum Anishinabek.

die I am going to eat what I enjoy. That's fish. All kinds of fish. But maybe we need to see the guidelines again because I really don't recall them right now. I just remember them telling us what fish we were suppose to eat. I taught my children to eat fish and they still do. I never mentioned them guidelines to them."⁴³

Conclusion

Despite two centuries of attack, the traditional Anishinabek foodway still plays an important role in Anishinabek communities in terms of health and wellness, economy, spiritual and cultural expression. Elders continue to have concerns regarding the quality and quantity of particular food items, but believe that the consumption of traditional foods is important in maintaining health and wellness for individuals and for communities. Most Elders were unaware of OMOE guidelines for the consumption of fish, and the workshop revealed several important findings with regards to consumption guidelines:

- scientists should be honest about the limitations of science in addressing environmental contamination and human health-related issues, particularly in Indigenous contexts;
- text-based guidelines are a culturally inappropriate way of communicating risk to Indigenous communities;
- government personnel and scientists must be willing to engage in long term face-to-face knowledge sharing workshops in order to learn more about Anishinabek systems of monitoring and to communicate risk from a scientific perspective; and
- Settler governments must acknowledge Indigenous perspectives on contamination as a symptom of the larger colonial project, rather than a problem that can be solved by not consuming particular food items.

Dissemination of Results and Proposed Action

When asked, the Elders and community members in attendance felt that in keeping with their oral traditions, there was no need for an extensive community report based on the workshop. The results of this component of the study will however be included with the community report alongside the scientific results. The Elders have requested that we seek more funding to continue to discuss these issues. As a result, the authors of this report have applied to the Indigenous Health Research Development program for the Ontario region for research funds to support another Anishinabek Knowledge workshop. The authors are also considering writing a peer reviewed manuscript based on the findings of the 2004-2005 and 2008-2009 study.

⁴³ Elder quote from the Elders Gathering, March 23-24, 2009, held at Asubpeeschoseewagong Netum Anishinabek.

Objectives Not Met

All of our objectives for this component of the study were met.

Lesson Learned

- We believe that the knowledge of the Elders is paramount in any environmental contaminants research initiative. We believe that funding agencies need to expand the role of Indigenous Knowledge in health related contaminants work, so that it constitutes at least half of the research resources, so that it guides the scientific work, and so that it creates more meaningful studies and results for Indigenous Peoples.
- Elders and Indigenous Knowledge Holders should have decision-making roles on all community-based research teams.
- Funding guidelines should be revised to put Indigenous Knowledge and Indigenous perspectives at the fore, and so that Indigenous Knowledge is given at least the same weight as western science in all aspects of the study.
- Researchers should aim to use culturally inherent research methodologies present within Indigenous intellectual traditions and under the advisement of Indigenous Knowledge Holders in Indigenous Knowledge research.
- Currently, the NFNECP funding guidelines in no way reflect a community-based approach to research. Modifying funding criteria to support the best practices of community-based research would enable communities to define the research problem and develop research-based programs to support objectives defined by the communities themselves, rather than the agenda of the funder.