

The Trouble with TEK

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I grew up in southern California loving to gather and consume WEPs, though they were a minority report in my family's TFS. I might even venture to say that my experience as a post-toddler seeking out what we called Indian chewing-gum, sour grass, soap root, and prickly pears sparked my enduring interest in TEK, LEK, IK, TREM, and the FEW nexus, inspiring both a personal and scholarly process of unearthing the CMP in which my own life unfolds, studying with and learning from IPs mainly in North, South and Mesoamerica.

Great, right?

To keep the trouble with 'TEK' simple and self-evident, I will limit myself here to voicing two core objections to acronym creep in general, and for ethnobiology in particular. First, acronyms nominalize processes. Secondly, the abundant use of acronyms obscures communication and, as a shibboleth, limits readership.

My most throat-tightening grievance regarding TEK is the way that term takes hostage the living, changing, evanescent, and emergent processes it pretends to describe as an abbreviation of 'Traditional Ecological Knowledge.' The word *traditional* is derived from the action "of handing over...of transmitting an idea, concept or teaching" (OED 2016). The word has its critics but that is for another debate another time (e.g., see Mallon 2010). *Ecological knowledge* is a "condition of knowing something" (OED 2016) about the interrelationships between living entities and their environments. The phenomenological experience of traditional ecological knowing is inescapably relational and transactional, best characterized by the way it activates or mediates interaction. First Nations and Indigenous scholars have attempted to correct the ways settler/colonial academics try to turn these active, living relations of knowing and acting into simple data points that can be compared and integrated with traditional Western modes of knowing (Mika 2012; Reo 2011; Smith et al. 2016). Somehow, by using a neat label and a gerund, it is easier to objectify people, other animals, plants,

landscapes, a multitude of environments, and transform sources of life into 'resources' to be managed (Looking Horse 2016; Nadasdy 2003; Wyndham 2009).

Thus, the coagulation that is the phrase Traditional Ecological Knowledge itself is an epistemic shortcut that allows for the oversimplified objectification of complex and varied processes. It cuts networks of relatedness and sheds context. But, as the use of the additional shortcut of its acronym form grows more popular and spawns a hundred offspring (WEP, TFS, IK, LEK, etc., see above), we could surely agree that by not even bothering to spell out the words *traditional*, *ecological*, and *knowledge*, writing or uttering TEK instead, we lose all hope of remembering that we are communicating about living breathing relations.

By using TEK we are confessing to having chopped away the capillaries of connection and to be ok with placing our cauterized notions neatly in a box, tied and labeled as commodities. We tourniquet verbs into nouns. They are so much easier to sell that way. They can be sorted and stacked in piles and sold to conservationists, to policy planners, to government officials, even back to the people with whom they originated. The deep histories, the political realities, and the social inequities that likely adhere to the matter at hand can all thus be glossed over, elided, and seemingly depoliticized (Nadasdy 1999).

I remember that in my first year as a graduate student, I was shocked at how prevalent the use of acronyms and abbreviations was in the anthropology literature we read (predominantly those published after, say, 1980)—thus I was introduced to ABM, STS, ANT, and, yes, TEK. Some journals in the technical sciences have been so strict about word count that authors embraced acronyms to save those six, seven, or eight words in their total editorial count. People like to use field terms as a shortcut to a cloud of inter-related meanings. And these are shibboleths:

they help create social in-group exclusivity, as do jargon or arcane vocabulary. In fact, I remember a first prick of self-satisfaction, of feeling part of an in-group when I knew what TEK stood for, and another student did not. (I humbly apologize to whomever that was!) That is not the way to create the next generations of scholars who can write clearly about complex ecological interrelationships. Let's agree to give up our (delusional) aspiration of showing that we know the passwords to some elite clique and just write out what we are trying to say. Deep in the crust of our hearts we already know that there are no real kudos to be accumulated in the prestige-economy that is academia by taking these cognitive shortcuts.

Finally, the creep of the acronym is a warning symptom of a more pervasive militarization of daily life, including the daily life of academia. The US Military uses over 600 acronyms and abbreviations in its internal and external communications (Wikipedia 2016), explained by a justifiable need for quick, clear communications in the heat of battle, and in-group knowledge that contributes to linguistic and identity cohesion. For non-initiates, acronym-talk presents obstacles to understanding military commands or communiqués. Academia has innocently adopted many military innovations (the hand-me-downs of computers, email, GPS, drones, cargo pants, to name a few). But gentle reader, let us not mix up the IEDs with the OEDs. And if you are anything like me, when you are half way through an article you may no longer remember what the lonely letters of an acronym stand for. You find that you must search back through the piece to locate where the author first introduced the term. Don't let journal editors tell you that you must abbreviate for them to save a few tens of character spaces in layout. When you want to write or say TEK, instead try for words that really get to the heart of the matter. Your readers will notice and thank you.

So, let's keep the trouble with TEK in mind, and all live HEA.¹

Notes

1. Authors working in the Romance genre will know this common, infelicitous acronym for Happily Ever After. The other acronyms above were gleaned from published articles I have encountered recently, and stand for, in alphabetical order:

ANT Actor-Network Theory

ABM Agent-Based Modeling

CMP Colonial Matrix of Power
FEW Food-Energy-Water nexus
GPS Global Positioning System
IED Improvised Explosive Device
IK Indigenous Knowledge
IPs Indigenous Peoples
LEK Local Ecological Knowledge
OED Oxford English Dictionary
STS Science & Technology Studies
TEK Traditional Ecological Knowledge
TFS Traditional Food Systems
TREM Traditional Resource Ecosystem Management
WEP Wild Edible Plant

Fortunately, *Ethnobiology Letters* and the *Journal of Ethnobiology* discourage acronyms, so we are usually in good company without them on these pages.

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