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Introduction to the Future of Traditional Knowledge Research

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Abstract

This introductory essay to the special issue, "The Future of Traditional Knowledge Research: Building Partnership and Capacity," discusses some of the fundamental issues about what researchers and Indigenous peoples face in collaborating research. It also discusses how contributing authors have dealt with these problems in the past.

Keywords

traditional knowledge research, partnership, collaboration, decolonisation

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The Future of Traditional Knowledge Research: Building Partnership and Capacity

Since the late twentieth century, academics, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), lawyers, and policymakers have become increasingly aware that locally produced historical and contemporary knowledge and wisdom not only sustain in-situ conservation of the environment and biodiversity, but also empower Indigenous peoples and local communities. Hasty actions to collect knowledge without establishing cross-cultural understanding and secure fair negotiating terms, however, have strained the relationships between researchers (or lawyers, courts, policymakers) and knowledge holders. Today, we have a large number of academic studies published on the subject of traditional knowledge, Indigenous knowledge, and local knowledge. United Nations agencies (e.g., the World Intellectual Property Organization [WIPO], the United Nations University Institute for the Advanced Study of Sustainability [UNU-IAS], the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], the United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP], the United Nations Development Programme [UNDP]) and NGOs (e.g., International Union for the Conservation of Nature [IUCN], Natural Justice) have published independent studies on how researchers and aid workers along with government agents might develop collaborative partnerships in order to better represent and protect traditional (ecological) knowledge in their works. Many of these guides stress the need to create respectful and mutually beneficial relationships between researchers and Indigenous and local peoples, but no substantial cross-cultural and comparative publication exists that addresses the issue of how researchers and other interested groups may achieve such relationships. Young and inexperienced researchers (including consultants) and government agents, therefore, cannot look for guidance in the existing literature about how they may build their capacity to be cross-culturally and ethically competent in generating new knowledge and publicizing the results of their studies on locally produced historical and contemporary knowledge and wisdom.

The main objective of this present collection of essays, therefore, is to address the issue of building partnerships and capacity to improve the quality of participatory research and policies involving Indigenous communities. It provides readers, especially young academic, government, and NGO researchers, with applied ethical guidelines for cross-cultural and interdisciplinary research. It also aims to facilitate further discussion with a set of case studies and personal experience. The authors represented here have a long and successful experience in working with Indigenous peoples and local communities. I also have included President Clément Chartier, distinguished Canadian Indigenous leader, to share his insights and experience in working with academic communities.

This collection covers topics related to collaborative research on the presentation of historical evidence; legal representation of Indigenous knowledge in court; the history of Indigenous peoples' collaboration in anthropological fieldwork; Indigenous research paradigms for fishery governance

and health; Indigenous leadership for collaborative research; and Indigenous engagement in environmental management. Contributors reveal one way or another how the processes of documenting, commercializing, and/or representing traditional knowledge that can influence political, legal, market, and research decisions. These issues have the potential to considerably affect future relationships among academics, lawyers, Indigenous peoples, scientists, local communities, NGOs, and other stakeholders when faced with Indigenous claims, economic developments, and environmental conservation activities.

The articles in this special issue, “The Future of Traditional Knowledge Research: Building Partnership and Capacity,” demonstrate the potential benefit of traditional knowledge research to both researchers, and Indigenous peoples and local communities alike *if* researchers sufficiently reflect upon the needs and interests of both academic and Indigenous communities. Michael Douglas (aquatic ecologist) and Sue Jackson (geographer) amply demonstrate this point in their account of ethical public engagement with local Aboriginal communities in northern Australia using the TRaCK environmental research program (2006 to 2011). Largely based on an Australian “Indigenous Engagement Strategy,” the TRaCK program encouraged Indigenous leaders to contribute to research activities and strengthened their sense of pride in their traditional culture. Jackson and Douglas also thoughtfully suggest that respectful and trusting relationships must be the hallmark of all research interactions.

Laura Hall, Colleen Dell, Barb Fornssler, Carol Hopkins, Christopher Mushquash, and Margo Rowan who work as part of the University of Saskatchewan Research Chair in Substance Abuse were engaged in cultural interventions in First Nations’ alcohol and drug treatment. Believing that “research is inherently beneficial to the healing and wellbeing of Indigenous communities,” they adopted the concept of “two-eyed seeing” as a guiding principle in research to bridge cultural gaps between Indigenous peoples and Western researchers. Similar to the TRaCK program, Hall and her colleagues attempted to empower Indigenous people in Aboriginal health research; in so doing, their research processes facilitated the decolonization of the past power imbalance, healing from the past wrongs, and cultural renewal.

Nicole Latulippe’s (geographer) article on Indigenous fishery governance similarly emphasizes inherent benefits of research and governance for both Indigenous peoples and researchers. She proposes that non-Indigenous scholars attempt to learn about the “Indigenous research paradigm” by maintaining long-term dialogues with Indigenous knowledge holders. The effort for “bridging parallel rows” of the two paradigms can be seen as the important bi-cultural processes that the ancestors of Canadian representatives and Indigenous representative envisioned but left unaccomplished in observing peace and friendship treaties.

In northern Brazil, Noemi Miyasaka Porro (anthropologist) and Joaquim Shiraishi Neto (legal scholar) helped traditional local communities—“babassu breaker women” and Indigenous

Ashaninka—to secure community-based businesses. Those local communities have faced increasing competition and encroachment from global commercial interests in the local market. Porro and Neto discuss how scholars helped local communities to better protect local interests with information and legal support.

Indigenous leaders in Canada have also played important roles in collaborating with researchers in order to secure their rights to land and resources. President Clément Chartier (lawyer) has successfully led the Métis National Council and won a number of landmark court cases for Métis harvesting and land rights. As he recounts in his article for this edition, his success was partly based on collaboration with historical geographers Frank Tough and Arthur J. Ray who worked as expert witnesses in most major Métis rights cases since the 1990s.

Arthur J. Ray has appeared in many major court cases for First Nations and the Métis people since the 1980s. In his article for this edition, he discusses a gap in knowledge recognition between Western courts and Indigenous peoples in Australia, Canada, and the United States. Ray observed that past litigation experiences have made courts in Australia and Canada become more culturally sensitive by allowing elders' testimony in the traditional territory (e.g., *Chief Victor Buffalo v. Canada*) or admitting Métis fiddlers to play Red River jig (e.g., *Regina v. Belhumeur*). Traditional elders also have become more flexible to allow judges and lawyers to enter their sacred sites or listen to secret stories and songs.

Another important point many contributors in this edition emphasize is the importance of de-colonization as the foundation for future reconciliation and collaboration. The de-colonization must be done with a good understanding of past mistakes and successes. In examining the cross-cultural interaction that resulted in seminal publications on Indigenous peoples in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, Dianne C. Newell (historian of technology and society) points out that well known ethnographers such as Franz Boas, Marius Barbeau, Charles F. Newcombe, and Edward Sapir relied heavily on Indigenous informants and partners such as George Hunt, William Beynon, Charles James Nowell, Alex Thomas, and often their wives and other female relatives. She argues that the resulting old ethnographies have become integrated into the traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) of descendent Indigenous communities today in the Pacific Northwest coast and, therefore, must be taken into account in understanding what TEK has survived.

Matsui's article also demonstrates that the legacy of early twentieth-century writings about "primitive" traditional culture and knowledge still run through many influential writings on traditional knowledge today. From the early twentieth century to the present, scholars have dealt with traditional knowledge and, to some extent, attempted to define or validate it. However, a large number of academic publications on traditional knowledge have not yet come to the clear understanding about what is traditional knowledge; thus, confusing policymakers and students today.

The compilation of such disparate research essays into a special issue of the *International Indigenous Policy Journal* (IIPJ) contributes to the scholarship of traditional knowledge research in numerous important ways. First, it provides opportunities to compare and contrast a number of case studies and lessons from Australia, Brazil, and Canada. Readers can compare and reflect on the conditions and standards of traditional knowledge research in these countries with questions pertinent to pressing current issues for Indigenous peoples in mind, such as, for example, the contrast between successful examples of watershed management among Indigenous communities in northern Australia and Indigenous community research in Brazil. Or whether the procedures that admit oral evidence in Australian and Canadian courts can provide useful models for other countries such as Brazil, where its courts face similar Indigenous rights claims.

Second, this collection informs readers on debates and discussions around cultural differences among wide-ranging stakeholders. Although United Nations' agencies have actively produced ethical guidelines for researchers to conduct data collection and environmental impact assessments, these policy statements and directives alone cannot help researchers achieve their goals. The core values and practices that are needed for building ethical relationships will only emerge from a solid cross-cultural understanding and from capacity building efforts by both researchers and their Indigenous collaborators. I believe that the strong contribution from the authors in this collection illustrates this point.

Finally, the present collection of papers uniquely reveals a diversity of disciplinary engagements with traditional knowledge of Indigenous peoples and local communities that should prove informative for researchers who conduct policy relevant applied research on Indigenous peoples within a global context. In particular, it should appeal to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students of anthropology, ecology, environmental sciences, geography, history, Indigenous studies, law, philosophy, and community empowerment.

As guest editor for this collection, I would like to express my gratitude to not only all the contributors in this issue but also those who showed an interest in the topic. In particular, I would like to thank Susan Wingert, managing editor of this journal, for generously providing the ideas and editorial assistance to make this special issue on "the Future of Traditional Knowledge Research" happen. I also would like to acknowledge that the original idea for this issue grew out of a small seminar on the topic that Suneetha M. Subramanian and I organized at the United Nations University-Institute of Advanced Studies in December 2011. I also organized the follow-up seminars at the University of Tsukuba. Since then, Arthur J. Ray, Dianne C. Newell, and Sue Jackson have helped me refine my ideas about this special issue to the IIPJ. All these events were made possible by the generous grants I received from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science.