

SUMMARY OF BEST PRACTICES FOR APPLYING TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE IN GOVERNMENT OF THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES PROGRAMMING AND SERVICES

Background

This document provides a brief overview of the key elements of *best practice* as it applies to the collection, incorporation, and/or application of traditional knowledge (TK) in government programs and services.

What Is Traditional Knowledge?

The Government of the Northwest Territories defines TK as:

*...knowledge and values, which have been acquired through experience, observation, from the land or from spiritual teachings, and handed down from one generation to another.*¹

This definition of TK guides all internal GNWT TK initiatives.

For the purpose of environmental assessments, which are federally legislated, the Mackenzie Valley Environmental Impact Review Board (MVEIRB) has identified three key elements in its definition of traditional knowledge:

- 1) **Knowledge about the environment** -- This is factual or “rational” knowledge about the environment. It includes specific observations, knowledge of associations or patterns of biophysical, social and cultural phenomena, inferences, or statements about cause and effect, and impact predictions. All are based on direct observation and experience, shared information within the community and over generations.
- 2) **Knowledge about use and management of the environment** -- This is the knowledge that people have about how they use the environment and about how they manage their relationship with the environment. Examples include cultural practices and social activities, land use patterns, archaeological sites, harvesting practices, and harvesting levels, both past and present.
- 3) **Values about the environment** -- This knowledge consists of peoples’ values and preferences, and what they consider “significant” or valued components of the environment, and what they feel is the “significance” of impacts on those valued components. Aboriginal spirituality and culture plays

¹ GNWT Traditional Knowledge Policy 53.03, March 2005.

a strong role in determining such values. This element of traditional knowledge includes moral and ethical statements about the environment and about the relationships between humans, animals, and the environment; the “right way” to do things.²

Recent consultations carried out with traditional knowledge practitioners and researchers by the federal Cumulative Impacts Monitoring Program (CIMP) resulted in the preliminary, but unverified, documentation of Dene terms for the concept of traditional knowledge.³

| Region | Term | English Translation |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| Tâîchô | Whadèö naòwo | Knowledge from long ago |
| K’asho Got’ine (N. Slavey) | Dene nek’e gúæá | Traditional knowledge |
| | Dene naowéré | Traditional practitioner |
| | Dene æaríwíne | Traditional thinking |
| Déline (N. Slavey) | Yahnñî gogodí | History/old stories |
| | Eâet’áadets’enîtô | Depend on each other |
| | Dene náowéré | Dene knowledge |
| South Slavey | Nahe nahodhe | Effort – the way we are, the way we have been |
| Dene Sûâiné | Yuníze hani | Stories from the past |
| Gwich’in | Dinjii zhuh kyuu gah gwidindàii | Knowing/practicing indigenous ways |

GNWT personnel must be sensitive to the differing definitions of TK and ensure that GNWT engagement in TK initiatives is consistent with internal policy while respectful of definitions being applied by partner agencies.

What is the Link between TK and Language?

It is important to recognize that Aboriginal languages are an integral part of traditional knowledge systems. There are 11 languages officially recognized in the Northwest Territories and 9 of these are Aboriginal languages: Inuvialuktun, Inuinnaqtun, Inuktituk, Gwich’in, North Slavey, South Slavey (Dene Zhatié), Tâîchô (Dogrib), Chipewyan (Dene Sûâiné), and Cree.⁴ Through these languages, northern Aboriginal people create a shared belief in and understanding of the world and our relationship to it:

Languages are about our identity – who we are and how we understand and interact with each other and the world around us.⁵

² Mackenzie Valley Environmental Impact Review Board. 2005.
³ NWT Cumulative Impact Monitoring Program. 2008.
⁴ Final Report, Special Committee on the Review of the Official Languages Act [SCOL]. Legislative Assembly, Yellowknife, 2003. p.1.
⁵ SCOL Act 2003. p.1.

Not only is it difficult to translate Aboriginal concepts regarding the natural world into English but it is also difficult to translate conventional scientific and technical concepts into Aboriginal languages.⁶

Ideally, people engaging in TK-related activities (whether research, programming, or service delivery) within Aboriginal communities would be proficient in understanding, at least, the oral language of the particular dialect of the Aboriginal peoples they are working with. An understanding of the written language would also be very useful. Bilingual personnel are a tremendous asset for bridging language gaps that may exist. Where bilingual personnel are not available, the use of experienced and/or certified interpreter-translators can also help bridge this gap.⁷

Given the challenges associated with translating information across cultures, the success, integrity, and effectiveness of TK-related activities can be significantly increased by ensuring full use of the Aboriginal languages.

What are the Key Elements of Best Practice?

The best practices outlined in this section are based on common themes which emerged through a review of a variety of documents that describe the principles and procedures for gathering and applying traditional knowledge information in the north.

1. Understand and Acknowledge the Value of TK

To effectively incorporate TK as a meaningful component of government activities, the knowledge system associated with the internal generation and maintenance of TK must be assigned the same value and respect as that assigned to scientific findings.⁸ This does not mean that TK can or should be applied without oversight and critique, rather that we seek to understand and acknowledge the oversight and critique measures that are already embedded within traditional knowledge systems, rather than expecting TK to fit into critical processes developed for conventional scientific knowledge systems.

2. Establish and Apply Appropriate Definitions of TK

The GNWT has already developed a working definition of traditional knowledge for policy purposes. For internal GNWT TK initiatives, this definition must apply. Where GNWT personnel participate in TK initiatives that are governed and/or driven by other agencies (such as the MVEIRB or regional cultural institutes), due respect must be given to the working definitions of TK developed and applied by those agencies.

⁶ Kendrick, 2000 cited in: SCOL Act, 2003. p.7.

⁷ Hart, Elisa. 1995.

⁸ ITK and NRI. 2006.

3. Ensure the Protection of Sensitive Information

Some elements of traditional knowledge are considered to be privileged and/or confidential information. Protocols for the protection of traditional knowledge and intellectual property rights must be discussed and agreed upon prior to proceeding with TK-related activities in any Aboriginal community.

Outside agencies are responsible for ensuring that the traditional knowledge entrusted to them by communities is treated in accordance with established protocols and instructions for confidentiality. There must be clear understanding and agreement on the control of TK information, including its storage, use, and release.⁹

4. Adhere to Community-based Protocols

TK-related activities carried out in the NWT must adhere to community and/or regional TK protocols. Most regions and many individual communities have developed TK protocols in relation to research, and these protocols can be used or adapted to accommodate a wider range of TK-related activities, including program and service delivery. These protocols generally outline acceptable ground-rules for engagement with communities and TK holders regarding the gathering and use of traditional knowledge data and information.

It is strongly recommended that government personnel establish clearly-defined relationships with community representatives and participants before commencing TK-related research or other activities to ensure a common understanding of each other's goals and expectations.¹⁰ This relationship could take the form of a formal research or program agreement or could be outlined in some other form of document.

5. Ensure Community Engagement

Working effectively with traditional knowledge requires community support and involvement, a collaborative approach, and respect for local language and cultural values.¹¹ For this reason, a number of TK researchers have adopted the *community-based participatory research* (CBPR) methodology, which provides a framework for blending TK research with scientific models to produce productive working relationships between Aboriginal and scientific communities¹².

CBPR methodology requires external agencies and personnel to work closely with communities and TK holders to establish and implement projects, programs, or services

⁹ ITK and NRI 2006:8

¹⁰ KAVIK-AXYS Inc. 2005.

¹¹ GNWT Department of Education, Culture and Employment. 2007.

¹² Fletcher, C. 2003.

that reflect local perspectives, needs, capacity, and schedules. Applying the principles and measures of CBPR can help build and maintain community participation, interest and trust between government agencies, agency personnel, and the community as a whole.

Engagement with communities also means establishing meaningful relationships on a more personal level, through positive social interaction such as attending social functions and participating in community events. For those personnel unfamiliar with the cultural context and fabric of the north, social interaction can increase awareness and build relationships that ultimately strengthen and enhance working relationships.

6. *Ensure Informed Consent*

The collection and use of traditional knowledge usually requires two levels of informed consent in advance: from local governing bodies as well as from the individuals sharing that information.¹³ Informed consent usually requires some form of documented statement or oral agreement, although the nature of these agreements may vary.

Where regional or community TK protocols are not in place to guide consent considerations, the issue of consent must be discussed in advance with the Aboriginal governments or agencies that represent local TK holders.

7. *Ensure Local Ownership and Control of Information*

Aboriginal peoples and their respective communities retain inherent rights to their knowledge, cultural practices, and traditions, even where that information is being shared with others. However, based on previous experiences, many Aboriginal groups and peoples will not share information out of fear of losing control over that information. Traditional knowledge has been, and continues to be, expropriated, misused, and/or misinterpreted by people and agencies outside of the Aboriginal communities.

Applying traditional knowledge in a meaningful and respectful way within government programs and services means acknowledging and accepting that the holders of TK will continually retain some degree of control over that knowledge.

Shared-use agreements, research agreements, copyright and confidentiality provisions, and physical control over raw materials and original data files are means to ensure and strengthen community control. Government personnel must be aware of the measures identified in different regions to ensure local control and adhere to these measures.¹⁴

¹³ Dehcho First Nation Traditional Knowledge Research Protocol. 2004.

¹⁴ Gwich'in Social & Cultural Institute 2004; and Dehcho First Nation 2004.

8. Interpret and Present TK in the Appropriate Cultural Context

In an attempt to make very complex knowledge understandable, TK is often separated from the wholistic and spiritual context in which it is embedded. Since some elements of TK lose meaning when removed from its cultural context, TK holders and the Aboriginal governments that represent them should have the opportunity to participate in the interpretation and application of TK to ensure that its meaning is fully conveyed and understood.¹⁵

9. Provide Benefits for the Use of TK

Given that TK is held at the community level, TK-related initiatives should support community capacity building by providing training and employment opportunities in the areas of language and culture.¹⁶

Along with providing TK information, community members can play direct and significant roles in GNWT traditional knowledge initiatives in a number of ways. They can provide services as consultants, project coordinators, researchers, community liaisons, interviewers, interpreters (spoken word), translators (written word) and/or transcribers. Community participants need to be appropriately recognized by getting credit in publications and/or reports and by being adequately and equitably compensated for their contributions. In most cases, engagement and compensation would be routed through the Aboriginal governments or agencies represented TK holders, rather than directly to individuals, given the collective nature of traditional knowledge systems.

10. Follow Formal Research Licensing Guidelines

In the Northwest Territories, all scientific research is licensable under the Scientists Act, a territorial legislation administered by the Aurora Research Institute in Inuvik.¹⁷ Licensed research includes the gathering of physical, social, and biological data as well as the gathering of traditional, indigenous, and/or local knowledge. Research involving land animals or wildlife habitat requires a Wildlife Research Permit, while research studies in archaeology require an Archaeologists Permit under the NWT Archaeological Sites Regulations.

The Aurora Research Institute, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, or the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre can be contacted to clarify regulatory requirements and to make contact with appropriate permitting and screening agencies. Permit application processes take time and may have to go through a community review

¹⁵ Mackenzie Valley Environmental Impact Review Board. 2005, and Alaska Native Science Commission.

¹⁶ Gwich'in Social & Cultural Institute 2004.

¹⁷ Aurora Research Institute, NWT Scientists Act: Consolidation of Scientists Act R.S.N.W.T. 1988, c.S-4.

process, so submit applications well in advance of the starting date for research projects.

11. Establish Clear Communication and Reporting Links

The development of an effective and appropriate communication strategy is fundamental in gaining and maintaining community support and involvement in TK-related activities, whether research or program / service delivery. Communication is essential to determining the desired, and appropriate, level of community involvement; ensuring initiatives proceed smoothly; and informing communities of all outcomes. Oral communications should be provided in both English and the local language dialect. Prepared documents should be shared with the designated community representative(s) in a timely manner and appropriate format. Where an initiative results in a final document or report, these must be reviewed and accepted by the community, through its designated representatives, before being released to other agencies.¹⁸

It is recommended that copies of materials generated through GNWT-funding projects or programs be archived with the NWT Archives as a component of project reporting. Making agreements with the Archives beforehand and ensuring that all project partners are aware that the information will be stored there is an essential part of project planning and reporting.

Final Comments

Although application of the best practices provided in this document will help ensure Aboriginal peoples and their knowledge are treated ethically and appropriately, it must always be recognized that any acquisition, use, publication, or application of TK by GNWT personnel must be in accordance with the protocols and wishes of the peoples holding that knowledge. This is best achieved where TK initiatives are guided and/or managed by the holders of that knowledge through those Aboriginal governments or agencies tasked to represent TK interests.

TK implementation within government is an evolving process so *best practice* will also evolve and mature over time through experience, dialogue, and increased awareness of the benefits of utilizing traditional knowledge, along with conventional scientific approaches, to address the issues and challenges facing all northern peoples.

¹⁸ Dehcho First Nations 2004.

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