

Building The Fire: Preserving Local Knowledge and Traditions in the Face of Globalization

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Thank you for the honor of being here and for the opportunity to share in this important dialogue. Specifically, thank you to the government of Bhutan for hosting such a visionary event, and to the Centre for Bhutan Studies for bringing this gathering into reality. For me, stepping into Bhutan was like entering a sacred landscape or shrine room because our teacher, Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche wrote the Sadhana of Mahamudra when he was here at Taksang in 1969. Our Buddhist community in the west still practices that liturgy, which describes the trees and the greenery, the animals and sounds, the mountains and the joy of Dharma practice, and here we are in the middle of it. Thank you as well for preserving this sacred environment.

When people have a sense of genuine well-being, they can share their own goodness, work well with others, and maintain a healthy, sustainable relationship with their environment. How to bring about this kind of reality for everyone and create a compassionate society is the challenge facing all communities and governments. What brings out this sense of well-being is not necessarily having material wealth. Rather, people find a sense of well-being when their basic needs are met, their lives are in harmony with their fundamental values, and are connected to a larger social vision.

In terms of this conference, what are the indicators of this larger sense of well-being?

What happens to the values and the indicators of well-being when we move beyond familiar cultural boundaries? If there are universal indicators, they will not only reflect the values of one cultural or religious view, but of people from diverse cultures.

I have had the good fortune to work with many indigenous people and the Innu and Inuit people of northern Canada in particular. In that context, I have had to look into the painful realities of people who have been colonized and subsequently marginalized, many of whom are just trying to survive day to day and have some fundamental sense of dignity in their lives. The obstacles to simply living are often daunting. Teen suicide among the indigenous population of Canada is five times that of other Canadians, and the drop out rate from school averages 50%. But, it is also important to look at what is happening in communities that is changing this situation and creating a positive future vision.

I would like to discuss one project, which I feel is a potential model for creating a sense of well being within a community, along with the indicators of success that have emerged from that work. I will speak from the point of

view of being from a developed nation, and being associated with those who do “development work,” terms I have always found discomfoting.

Since 1997, Environment Canada, a federal department of the Canadian government, has collaborated with the Innu Nation of Labrador and social scientists from the Gorsebrook Research Institute (GRI) at Saint Mary’s University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The initial goal was to develop comprehensive baseline ecological data of the Labrador landscape from both Innu and Western scientific perspectives. This foundational work has evolved into a community capacity building project referred to as the Innu Environmental Guardians Program (IEGP). The function of the program is to develop an educational path to train Innu in the management and protection of their ancestral lands based on Innu traditional values and current community needs. The program requires education not just as it is defined by Western scientists, but as it is defined by Innu tshishennuat (Innu elders) who are the holders of Innu environmental knowledge and a distinct world view.

As director of the project for the GRI, I have listened to tshishennuat speak of their ancestral lands, Nitassinan, as medicine. The tshishennuat often complained of the mental and physical sickness that afflicted them after government settlement programs in the 1940’s isolated them from their traditional lands. They could no longer communicate with their youth, who were being educated in unfamiliar ways and in a foreign language. The food they ate, they said, was no longer “medicine” because it did not come from the land. Even the animals they used to hunt were confused and sick, and no longer followed predictable migration routes.

Metaphorically speaking, finding the “medicine” again has been our challenge over the last six years. How do you bring a fragmented culture back into balance and find that source of well-being again? By fragmented culture, I don’t just mean the Innu, but all of us together, the global, pluralistic society.

The first step in capacity building is the recognition that everyone involved has to determine indicators that contribute toward wholeness and well-being. I refer to this first stage as “building the fire.” This is the aspect of capacity building that requires creating the conditions for communication and finding a mutual vision. I use the image of a fire because it is where people come together for warmth, food, and company. In this case, Environment Canada had to build an ecological knowledge base to support an environmental assessment process that integrated Western science and the traditional Indigenous Ecological Knowledge (IEK) of the Innu. To do this the Environment Canada team members needed to build their internal capacity for cultural awareness and gain the support of the Innu community. In looking internally, EC staff recognized the need for social scientists to assist in the mediation effort. They also recognized they needed to be “on the land” with people from the Innu community. This “being on

the land” both literally and metaphorically, meant that Innu could speak from their source of medicine and strength, and from what they knew. For EC and GRI researchers, this involved learning to listen to what Innu needed and wanted in order to participate in any collaborative project, and not just getting the information about the land.

This was the first step in building the foundation of trust (the fire) necessary to every project. During this stage, there are four key elements that need clear agreement:

What is the motivation for any organization or stakeholder to undertake a project?

Who will be served by the research?

Who is defining what knowledge is?

Who is making the decisions about how that knowledge is used?

Working closely with the community and meeting with tshishennuat and Innu representatives on the land, we have listened to the narratives of their existence, and what made them feel strong and well. And, they have listened to us. We found that increasing material wealth was not the central issue, but rather finding a bridge between Innu cultural values and resource use practices in relation to the demands of the changing world around them. Tshishennuat also wanted to be treated equitably, speak of what they knew and pass this on to the younger generation.

One indicator of well being, then, is listening and trust building. Evidence that this was taking place is captured in the following statement made by Peter Penashue, the President of the Innu Nation.

“Over the next few days, you’ll hear from scientists who have stopped pretending to be experts with answers, who are becoming students, assistants and allies of the communities”

A further step in building the fire is finding a research project suitable to the Innu Nation’s goals, as well as each stakeholder’s mandate. In this project, a research area was defined that directly involved the Innu community and addressed their needs—the protection of Innu lands and the preservation of their environmental knowledge. This could be regarded as another indicator of indigenous people’s well being.

Initially, this focal point was a culturally valued landscape called ashkui, areas of open water in the ice where Innu camped every spring to exploit a plethora of resources. Although the Innu refer to them as supermarkets, askhui sites are far more than that. All of the landscape around them is embedded with their history and world view. As one elder, Shimun Michel, stated, “Ashkui is Innu livelihood which cannot be separated from the trees, animals and everything else in nature – we must give every ounce of respect to the ashkui.”

This relationship the Innu have with their ancestral landscape points to a more profound level of the research—being conscientious and respectful about how we approach what we are researching and the values we are

bringing into the work. A friend from another indigenous group, the Mi'kmaq, once said that sacred sites are places you go to feel whole. For me, this mark of wholeness is equivalent to how we enter any sacred place. We learn to acknowledge whatever ancestry or lineage is present, and then respect how it manifests in the present. Recognizing this sacred aspect also requires a system of etiquette and values that act as guidelines for all research. Again, the president of the Innu Nation, Peter Penashue, articulated what were considered respectful rules for anyone coming to work within the community. For us at this conference, this has meaning if we wish to develop indicators of well-being across cultures.

- Base research on Innu values and perspectives;
- Incorporate Innu knowledge directed towards understanding ecological limits;
- Help to restore health to help communities;
- Help to develop sustainable economics;
- Respect Innu rights to make decisions about Innu future;
- Build confidence and capacity and transfer new skills to Innu communities; and
- Request Innu approval of research conducted in their territory as a fundamental principle.

As the first of the social scientists for this project to go on the land to interview tshishenuat, camp at an ashkui site, and document the Innu's extensive knowledge of the landscape, I realized how we have to shift the point of reference to the Innu community. No matter how much people might describe their life on the land, it is only by walking on it and moving through it with them that we can experience the rhythm of who they are as people, and what truly matters to them in their lives.

As a result of this and subsequent research, Environment Canada set up a network of sixteen ashkui sites for testing water chemistry. An Innu co-worker was hired to assist in this research and testing. Putting the Western scientific and Innu knowledge together provided a much more comprehensive understanding of the Labrador landscape, and these culturally valued areas. These two sources of information have been plotted and printed on digitized maps to assist in future environmental impact assessments. As an unexpected spin off, this research assisted the Innu in their much publicized battle to change low-level NATO air force flight testing corridors that passed over these ashkui sites, upsetting the life below.

This research is still ongoing but has shifted to looking at other cultural landscapes. Most importantly, the project has evolved into an in-community educational program referred to as the Innu Environmental Guardians Program. Beginning in 2000, by pooling resources from a

number of partnerships and undertaking new initiatives, the Innu Nation secured sufficient resources to employ a number of Environmental Guardians in the areas of fisheries, forestry, wildlife, mining, and environmental research. There are presently fourteen Innu Environmental Guardians employed by the Innu Nation. The Guardians are involved in the co-management of forestry resources with the provincial government, monitoring environmental compliance at Voisey's Bay Nickel Mine, monitoring fisheries and protecting fish habitats, determining threatened wildlife species and habitats, and water sampling to determine water chemistry base line data. As well, the Guardians participate in primary environmental research and in the monitoring and assessment of environmental impacts through research partnerships with government and university-based researchers.

Over the last two and one half years, we have been working with the Innu Nation to design the Guardians' program. The Environmental Guardians concept recognizes the importance of both the longstanding and substantial body of environmental knowledge held by the Innu, and the need for the Guardians to develop competency within Western scientific and technical disciplines concerned with environmental protection, management, and resource use. Incorporating these two ways of knowing requires Innu Environmental Guardians to acquire a unique set of skills and competencies that can reflect both Innu knowledge traditions, and the disciplines and skills that are recognized by formal Western educational institutions. At its core, however, the program is based on Innu values, needs, and concepts of well-being rather than being solely market driven.

The key to the program's success is in the delivery of the program and the incorporation of on going community concerns, which the Guardians are involved with daily. Some of the key components of the program are:

Courses are offered in 2-3 week modules and delivered within community or at field sites where projects are underway.

Learning is related to on-going projects, e.g., a forestry co-management agreement with the provincial government, a co-research project with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans on levels of mercury, monitoring the Voisey's Bay nickel mining activities, etc.

Modules are scheduled around "real" life situations, e.g., seasonal work, family obligations, in-county time.

Training crosses disciplines. Each Guardian needs training to deal with all the different parts of environmental monitoring.

Programs are bi-lingual (Innu Aimun and English) when *Tshishennuat* are present.

The program is Innu driven, which means the community decides the priorities, and learning is geared toward the preservation of their own land use and cultural practices. This knowledge is then used as the basis of decision making processes in any development project.

Tshishennuat are involved as advisors and as teachers.

The Guardians play a key role as translators and communicators to and from their communities, and within their own communities between different generations. Many government agencies, educational institutions, businesses, and non-profit organizations are approaching the Innu for a variety of research and development projects. The Guardians are responsible for communicating their cultural beliefs and values to these various outsiders, and then relate what is discussed back to their community in a meaningful and comprehensible way. This translation process back to the community involves the creation of new terminology for scientific concepts that have no equivalent in Innu Aimun (Innu language) since many of the *tshishennuat* speak only Innu Aimun. How do you describe mercury poisoning to people who have never studied chemistry or biology?

Within their communities, there is concern that the Innu youth no longer have the same relationship to the land as the *tshishennuat*, and therefore are losing the language of the land. Why is this so important? *Tshishennuat* have a complex and specialized knowledge. What they know and how they express that knowledge is like a library that is in their heads and will be lost with their passing. The *tshishennuat* are the speakers for and holders of the language of the land. Because of their living on the land, they are the best to advise and define the needs of any environmental development.

The Innu are also challenged to meet a need for developing a common written language of the landscape that transcends the local dialects, some of which are unintelligible to one another. Language itself is so politically infused that it sometimes can be the road block to any innovation. For instance, agreeing on the name or color of a tree can stall the development of a bi-lingual curriculum, not to mention become a political agenda between different communities. Using the model of the IEGP, we can begin to develop the vocabulary necessary to transcend the politics of local situations, and come to the common goal of preserving both the land and the language of a shared ancestral landscape.

In short, the Guardians provide access to information often inaccessible to community members, particularly *tshishennuat*, and also create inter-generational bridges. This type of communication, building a common language acceptable to all stakeholders, could be considered another indicator of indigenous people's well-being. It helps unify the community as well as address the loss of knowledge that will occur with the passing of the *tshishennuat*.

This is where the "fire" I spoke of at the beginning begins to spread, which means that a sense of identity among the Guardians as a "team" begins to take place as they come together to learn, discuss and conduct

projects together. As a team, they have more impact in supporting one another, sharing knowledge, offering different strengths to problem solve, and so forth. In turn, the community begins to regard them as a team of experts with a mandate to manage and protect their lands and cultural heritage. This includes the *tshishenuat*, who through their involvement are respected as teachers, but who are also learning the new way of looking at the landscape through a Western scientific model.

This past year, Saint Mary's University faculty joined in the effort to develop curriculum, offering formal academic accreditation to the training modules as a way to open up a university path to the Guardians. There was no requirement for any Guardian to take the two modules offered for credit—the intent was to train the Guardians, whether or not credit was offered. However, during the first of a two-module accredited course, all fourteen participants signed up with the University. This is a unique and historic move. Saint Mary's University faculty acknowledged the role of the *tshishenuat* as the legitimate authority on their own knowledge and teachers of equal stature in the modules. During the first accredited course, the *tshishenuat* were involved in the evaluation of the Guardians. Recognizing this, especially by traditionally established educational institutions, is part of the fire keeping process to develop the trust across cultures. Thus, another broader indicator of well-being for indigenous people is external recognition of their inherent knowledge base.

Further, the *tshishenuat* are co-evaluators with the module instructors. The Guardians are required to present their learning to them, which the *tshishenuat* then evaluate based on their criteria. In so doing, the *tshishenuat* begin to learn about such concepts as ecosystems, watersheds, urbanization, and pollution as well as the use of instruments such as the GPS, clinometers, and compasses. Anecdotally, during an evaluation where the Guardians were displaying the use of various instruments they use on the land, one *tshishenu* said, "We carry GPS in our heads to find locations." This was a poignant remark because it showed both his understanding of how the GPS worked as well as the change in how environmental knowledge is studied and stored.

The faculty at Saint Mary's University also recognizes the validity of a culture's need to be able to write and present in their first language within the Western educational system. Faculty working with the IEGP are attempting to broaden the definition of literacy to recognize the different languages of the world as unique and enriching to the educational process. Doing so does not overlook the necessity to learn English as a requirement for dealing with contemporary issues, but English does not have to be exclusive of other languages.

Capacity building has to involve all stakeholders. In a preliminary way, I would suggest that six indicators for wholeness or wellness of the

people and the project in relation to any project. Each of these questions could be developed into an indicator, or a measurable value.

Have all the people been engaged in defining the motivation to undertake the project?

Does the research serve the community as well as the investors? Who is the ultimate beneficiary of change?

Who is defining the knowledge that is being gathered and documented? Is it inclusive of all stakeholders?

Who is governing the decision making process and to what ends?

To what extent have avenues of communication, e.g., different languages, been included and respected?

To what extent have cultural land use practices and values been included in co-management agreements?

The Environmental Guardians Program has been cited as a model for capacity building across the north. It has broadened the definition of capacity building to include different perspectives and knowledge about the environment, as well as worked collaboratively with communities. This project, if fully realized, provides the foundations for indicators of well being for indigenous communities throughout the world.