

# **ABORIGINAL PEOPLES AND KNOWLEDGE: DECOLONIZING OUR PROCESSES**

**Leanne Simpson**  
Department of Native Studies  
Trent University  
Peterborough, Ontario  
Canada, K9J 7B8

## **Abstract / Résumé**

The author suggests that Aboriginal scholars need to take control of the uses of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK). She suggests that, as Aboriginal people heal, and develop new processes for their communities, TEK, as learned from Elders, will become more and more important.

L'auteur suggère que les universitaires autochtones doivent prendre le contrôle de l'utilisation du savoir écologique traditionnel. A son avis, plus les peuples autochtones s'engagent sur la voie de la guérison et élaborent de nouveaux processus pour leurs collectivités, le savoir écologique traditionnel, appris des Aînés, deviendra de plus en plus important.

## Introduction

*Aaniin.* My Anishinaabe name is *Petasamosake*, Walking Towards Women, and I completed my Ph.D. at the University of Manitoba, during which I spent a lot of time learning from my own Anishinaabeg people, and learning from the Elders. I work in the field of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). My research was unique, in that I did not want to *study* Aboriginal people, or my culture, or even Traditional Ecological Knowledge, but I wanted to *study* the people who were writing about TEK, defining it and documenting it in the area of the environment, and I wanted to do this from an Anishinaabe perspective. I interact with issues about Aboriginal peoples, our knowledge, and development as an academic, a researcher and a teacher. More importantly I think, these issues are internalized within me, in my heart, my mind and even in the blood that runs through my veins. Anishinaabe knowledge is part of my internal environment, it is part of who I am and it comes to me through relationships with family, Elders, spiritual leaders, and interactions with the spiritual world.

Researchers often now see Traditional Ecological Knowledge as a necessary component of environmental impact assessment, natural resource management regimes and development projects. The purpose of this paper is to examine how TEK is used or not used in Canada in terms of Aboriginal rights, and the role of Aboriginal paradigms, Aboriginal knowledge and Aboriginal processes in ensuring Indigenous peoples survive as *Peoples*.

## Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Aboriginal Rights

In the past ten years, Traditional Ecological Knowledge has also become synonymous with Indigenous communities at least amongst non-Aboriginal researchers. TEK has become a popular buzzword in universities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and in governmental departments. Academic papers on TEK are filling up journals in numerous disciplines. Non-Aboriginal researchers are flocking to Aboriginal communities, with one community in Ontario reporting 50-60 new non-Native researchers each year all asking to come and study their "TEK" (Lickers in Luckey, 1995). For Aboriginal peoples, at least initially, this was a good thing. After years of appropriating, assimilating, ignoring, undermining and degrading our knowledge, it was finally acknowledged by members of the dominant society. But outside researchers were not interested in all kinds of knowledge, and they remain specifically interested in knowledge that parallels the western scientific discipline of ecology or the "environment",

and they are often looking specifically for information that presents solutions to their own pending ecological crises (Knudston and Suzuki, 1995).

Early researchers in the field of TEK felt that by documenting TEK and by integrating it into their research, environmental impact assessments (EIAs) and co-management agreements that Aboriginal Peoples would achieve a greater voice and greater control over decisions that impact our lands, our communities and our lives (Johannes, 1993; Johnson, 1992). New research paradigms and methodologies were sought out to accomplish this task, and Aboriginal communities met both collaborative and participatory action research (PAR) processes. It was using these new ways of interacting with Aboriginal communities, that non-Aboriginal researchers felt they could best help us achieve our goals (Johnson, 1992).

Now, after nearly ten years of documenting and integrating, Aboriginal people are reviewing the results of this approach with great concern (McGregor, 1999; Simpson, 1999; Stevenson, 1999; Brubacher and McGregor, 1998; Bombay, 1996). To a large extent, Aboriginal people are unhappy with the idea that TEK can be written down and integrated into the frameworks of western science and contemporary development paradigms. TEK has largely been defined and developed as a concept outside of Aboriginal communities, and many Aboriginal academics and community experts have problems with the way TEK is defined, conceived and constructed by non-Native researchers, academics and development professionals (Battiste and Youngblood, 2000; Simpson, 1999; McGregor, 1999; Assembly of First Nations (AFN)/National Aboriginal Forestry Association (NAFA,) 1995). Most often, definitions reflect what the dominant society sees as important. The ecological component of our knowledge is emphasized rather than its spiritual foundations. TEK "data" or factual information is at the fore, rather than seeing our knowledge as worldviews, values, and processes (AFN/NAFA, 1995). In a sense, constructing Aboriginal knowledge into "TEK", has been a process of "scientizing" our knowledge for use in and the consumption of Euro-Canadian society (Stevenson, 1998; Stevenson, 1997).

The focus on documenting TEK, or converting it from its Oral form, to one that is both more accessible and acceptable to the dominant society has the impact of separating the knowledge from all of the context (the relationships, the world views, values, ethics, cultures, processes, spirituality) that gives it meaning. And it has the impact of separating knowledge from the people who possess it (Simpson 1999). For instance, when TEK is integrated into impact assessment, a large-scale documentation project is often undertaken. Elders are interviewed, hunters mark their hunting grounds on maps with the expectation that this knowledge is respected and

will be used to make decisions. Most often it is not. The documented TEK is interpreted and used by non-Aboriginal scientists and consultants, and the holders of the knowledge, the Aboriginal people, have no power over how that knowledge is interpreted or used (Stevenson, 1996). In these situations, TEK does very little to promote the interests of Aboriginal people. Unfortunately, this seems to be the way TEK is most often handled in Canada (Stevenson 1999; McGregor 1999; Simpson, 1999; Brubacher and McGregor 1998).

This is unacceptable to Aboriginal Peoples. Aboriginal Peoples do not want to be just consulted or studied, we have a right to be at the table using the knowledge inside of ourselves to make decisions that impact our people, our communities, the plants, the animals and our lands. We do not want other people deciding which components of our knowledge are important and which are not. We do not want scientists interpreting our knowledge, when it has been removed from the values and spiritual foundations that give it meaning. The processes of documenting and integrating remove knowledge from the people. When the knowledge is removed from our people, the power of our knowledge is lost. Our knowledge becomes assimilated and it is of very little use to those who are trying to advance their interests. When our knowledge becomes a commodity it can be used at will by the power structures of the dominant society to support existing doctrines and the status quo. It can be appropriated, marginalized and even used against us (Widdoson and Howard, 1998; Salmón, 1996).

## Aboriginal Paradigms

Aboriginal nations in North America have experienced a range of researchers, scientists and development professionals entering their communities to study, to develop or to empower them, almost since contact. This is well recorded in our oral traditions. In the past few years, many Aboriginal communities have said, "enough is enough". The Inuit people in Nunavut now require outsiders to obtain a license before they are allowed to enter into Inuit communities to conduct their work, with one community initiating a moratorium on research all together (Oakes and Riewe, 1996). Although research methodologies are evolving, orthodoxy is still common, and things collaborative or participatory are still rather unique. Some Aboriginal communities have benefited from the later, but many are still uncomfortable with participatory or collaborative research frameworks. For many, participatory action research just represents the latest way to study us, or the best way for Euro-Canadian researchers to access our knowledge. This is at least in part from our past collective experiences with outside researchers. However, I think it is extremely important to listen to

these voices and to explore why PAR does not work for many Aboriginal Peoples.

Ten years ago, Patricia Maguire wrote that:

The power of a paradigm is that it shapes, in nearly unconscious and thus unquestioned ways, perceptions and practices within disciplines. It shapes what we look at, how we look at things, what we label as problems, what problems we consider worth investigating and solving, and what methods are preferred for investigation and action. Likewise, a paradigm influences what we choose not to attend to; what we do not see (Maguire, 1987:11).

Back then, she was writing in reference to the conventional research paradigms of the past. Today, I think her words are equally important, but in reference to the alternative research paradigms that are employed in contemporary times. Specifically, participatory research and participatory development operate from a western paradigm, an *alternative* western paradigm (as opposed to the paradigm of the dominant society), but nonetheless a fundamentally western paradigm. Indigenous peoples have their *own* Indigenous paradigms and these paradigms perceive and understand knowledge and power fundamentally different than western alternative paradigms. I think that it is our own paradigms, our own ways of working with outsiders, our own decision making processes and ways of generating new knowledge that hold the greatest potential for finding solutions to our contemporary problems. We have our own philosophies, theories of knowledge, methodologies and methods. Instead of inserting fractions of our knowledge and our people into processes developed outside of our communities, Aboriginal peoples are using their own paradigms as foundations for research and development project, and our own concepts and processes for working with outsiders and western knowledge.

A number of Aboriginal intellectuals are calling for the recognition and employment of Aboriginal worldviews, paradigms, theories of knowledge and methods indigenous to Aboriginal cultures in intellectual endeavors and development projects (Tuhivai Smith, 1999; McPherson and Rabb, 1997; Martin-Hill, 1995; Warrior, 1995; Longclaws, 1994; Colorado, 1988). And in a sense, that was the hidden agenda behind my own dissertation work. On one level, I was being critical of the dogma of Euro-Canadian researchers in the field of TEK, and on a different level, the processes I used to gain these insights were the Ancient processes of my people, and the ones that are regularly employed in contemporary Aboriginal communities. To do this, required a personal decolonization process, led by several Elders and a

cultural revitalization process, again with me as the student, and the Elders as the teachers.

Aboriginal academics are in unique situations when they become "outside" researchers and enter into Aboriginal communities other than their own. Aboriginal communities, have specific cultural processes they go through when they have invited someone from another Aboriginal culture into their communities. When the outsider is Aboriginal, research or development projects operate from this Aboriginal cultural paradigm, and this often is in conflict with the community based, participatory or collaborative paradigms we are encouraged by other academics to use (Martin-Hill, 1995). It is most appropriate to adhere to the cultural protocols and norms that are common to everyone involved.

Learning within the context of Aboriginal knowledge is a life long experience, and some of the processes take 50 or 60 years to learn and master. To the Elders, Aboriginal academics are students. And for many Aboriginal academics, the Elders are the experts. They are the keepers of the knowledge, and we are the students. To think otherwise is to show tremendous disrespect for the Elders and Aboriginal community members. Often my role is not a co-researcher or a co-participant, but a student, and this is likely to remain the case for quite some time. Although my academic skills may be useful to differing degrees depending upon the project, the control and direction of the work must lie solely in the hands of the Elders and community experts. It is only when I sit quietly, patiently, and listen with my heart, that Indigenous paradigms and processes emerge and begin to assume control.

## Aboriginal Knowledge and Aboriginal Processes

Knowledge within traditional Aboriginal worldviews is perceived differently than it is in western society. For a large part, knowledge ultimately originates in the spirit world, and it is controlled in very specific and intricate ways in Aboriginal lifeways. The process of learning, or of gaining new knowledge is focused around learning more about oneself in relation to the land, the spirits and all of our relations (Cajete, 1999; Graveline, 1998). Although the Elders are expected to share their knowledge with younger members, this sharing follows cultural protocols, and individuals must be ready to accept full responsibility to use the knowledge they receive in a good way (Beck *et al.*, 1990). This knowledge might come to us from relationships, experiences, story-telling, dreaming, participating in ceremonies, from the Elders, the oral tradition, experimentation, observation, from our children, or from teachers in the plant and animal worlds (Simpson, 1999b; Peat, 1994). The spiritual foundation of these processes in the past

was fully integrated into daily life, and the inter-connectedness of all creation is integrated into the very structure of Aboriginal languages. Leroy Little Bear, Wolf Horn, Blood Tribe, Blackfoot Confederacy, writes:

Language is a good repository of this basic philosophy and world view. The English language is all about nouns, things, and objects, following up on the notion of objective language. It is not about process. Native languages are process oriented. I don't like to say verb-oriented because even the word verb is a noun (Little Bear, 1998:17).

Indigenous processes of "managing resources", teaching, knowing, governing, leading, resolving conflict, raising children, decision making and interacting with human and non-human entities are difficult to fully communicate in noun based languages. They can only be understood in reference of the worldview, principles and values of an Aboriginal culture and by recognizing and respecting the spiritual foundation of our knowledge. When these are ignored, the creative, innovative, and dynamic nature of Aboriginal knowledge is lost, so too is the understanding that Aboriginal knowledge is at once values, process and content.

It is important to note that Aboriginal peoples have continued using their knowledge to suit their own needs and to live sustainably for thousands and thousands of years. I am noticing that a great many Aboriginal Nations are returning to Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous processes to solve contemporary problems. The Anishinaabeg (Ojibway) of Hollow Water Nation in Manitoba are using their own Anishinaabe processes, traditions and ways of healing in their community holistic healing circles, a successful attempt to heal individuals and communities from physical and sexual abuse. The Rotinohshonni (Mohawks) of Kanawake have begun the "re-establishment of a traditional political culture" (Alfred, 1999:81). The Haida Nation of Haida Gwaii has entered into a co-management agreement with the Federal Government for the "management" of Gwaii Hanaas National Park Reserve based on Haida values. Similarly, the Gitksan Wet'suwet'en Nation in northern British Columbia is "managing" the lands of their Clans and Houses in their traditional territory based on their own worldview and values, and the knowledge of the hereditary Chiefs and the oral tradition (Walsh, 1998). The Okanagan people in southern British Columbia are taking control of their education by using their own "enow'kin process" (Armstrong, 1997). As more and more Aboriginal Peoples look to their traditions and to their knowledge for the strength and courage to meet the demands of contemporary society, the process of cultural revitalization will be recorded in our oral traditions and will become part of our Indigenous

knowledge, just our experiences with the process of colonization, assimilation, and colonialism is part of our body of knowledge.

With this knowledge, we fully understand the power structures that have dominated our daily lives for the past 500 years. We are intelligent, intellectual people. We have been advocating for social change for centuries, we are experts at resisting the power structure of the dominant society. We have resisted decades of assimilation policies. We have survived as Aboriginal peoples. Researchers and activists advocating for social change have something to learn from our people.

### **Non-Participation as a Form of Resistance**

Participation, respect for individuals' autonomy, and diversity are values that are common amongst many Aboriginal peoples, although they must be viewed within our cultural contexts. In the face of colonialism, non-participation has also proven to be an effective form of resistance. Refusing to participate in co-management agreements, EIAs, treaty negotiations, natural resource management agreements, research projects and the Euro-Canadian educational system are effective ways of resisting the dominance of Euro-Canadian society, and its assimilative tendencies. By not participating, Aboriginal peoples send the message that the process is unacceptable to them. That the process or framework itself negates power sharing, traditional values, Indigenous knowledge and meaningful negotiation by Aboriginal peoples.

As our experiences with TEK have shown us, participation does not guarantee that Aboriginal people will be valued, listened to, and afforded the respect we deserve. Resistance is a powerful tool Aboriginal communities have fostered in order to survive the hostilities of the past, and we will continue to resist in order to provide our children with land, traditions and cultures that are meaningful to them.

### **Ancient Directions for the Future**

At the time of their contact with Europeans, the vast majority of Native American societies had achieved true civilization: they did not abuse the earth, they promoted communal responsibility, they practiced equality in gender relations, and they respected individual freedom (Alfred, 1999:22).

Solutions to our contemporary problems will come when we turn to the voices of our ancestors, when we sing our songs, dance our dances, and live our traditions. Academics, researchers and development workers can support us in these aspirations. Outside researchers who are useful to Aboriginal peoples do not have their own research agendas, or they are a



least able to put them aside. They are willing to spend time looking inside themselves, uncovering their own biases, and privileges and they are willing to learn *from* our people—not *about* Aboriginal peoples, but about themselves and their place in the cosmos. They are willing to be transformed, in a sense, they are willing to be *developed*. Change for Aboriginal peoples will come when the dominant society respects us as Peoples, honours our treaties to their full meaning and intent, acknowledges our land rights and treats us with the same respect any self-governing Nation would expect (McGregor, 1999). It is not Aboriginal people who have to *change* or be *developed*, it is Euro-Canadians. And I like to think that Euro-Canadian NGOs, researchers, academics and community developers have a role to play in this transformation.

Aboriginal peoples have our own work to do. We have to continue to heal from past abuses; from the epidemics that wiped out between 50-90 percent of our communities, the violence from colonization, colonialism, attempted assimilation, residential schools, the *Indian Act*. We have to heal from the generations of abuse and maltreatment that continue in our communities today. Because in order to survive as nations, as peoples, we have to live our traditions, listen to the whispers of our Ancestors, and heed the warnings of the Grandmothers and Grandfathers. Taiaiake Alfred, Rotinohshonni, and an Indigenous academic writes:

The present crises [of Aboriginal communities] reflects our cultural loss, anger at the mainstream's lack of respect for our rights, and disappointment in those of our own people who have turned their backs on tradition. And I believe it is heightened because the choices we make today will determine whether or not we survive as indigenous peoples beyond the next generation. No one can deny that our cultures have been eroded and our languages lost, that most of our communities subsist in a state of abject economic dependency, that our governments are weak, and that white encroachment on our lands continues. We can, of course, choose to ignore these realities and simply accede to the dissolution of our cultures and nations. Or we can commit ourselves to a different path, one that honours the memory of those who have sacrificed, fought, and died to preserve the integrity of our nations. This path, the opposite of the one we are on now, leads to a renewed political and social life based on our traditional values (Alfred, 1999:xi-xii).

Our Elders tell us that the earth is sick, and when the earth is sick the people are also sick. If we do not work together on our complimentary paths, Aboriginal peoples will not survive, neither will mother earth, or Euro-Canadian people.

## References

- Alfred, Taiaiake  
 1999 *Peace, Power and Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto*. Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press.
- Armstrong, Jeanette  
 1997 The Spirit of the People has Awakened and is Enjoying Creation Through Us, pp. 82-94 in D. Thorpe (Editor): *The People of the Seventh Fire*. Ithaca, New York: Akwe:kon Press, Cornell University
- Assembly of First Nations, National Aboriginal Forestry Association  
 1995 *The Feasibility of Representing Traditional Indigenous Knowledge in Cartographic, Pictorial or Textual Forms*. Jointly Support by the NAFA National Atlas Information Service and the Environment Division of the AFN, Ottawa, Ontario.
- Battiste, Marie and James Youngblood Henderson  
 2000 *Protecting Indigenous Knowledge and Heritage: A Global Challenge*. Saskatoon, Saskatchewan: Purich Publishing.
- Beck, P.V., A.L. Walters and N. Francisco  
 1990 *The Sacred: Ways of Knowledge, Sources of Life*. Tsailé, Arizona: Navajo Community College, Northland Publishing (originally published in 1977).
- Brubacher, D. and D. McGregor  
 1998 *Aboriginal Forest-Related Traditional Ecological Knowledge in Canada: A Contribution to the Technical Paper for Presentation to the Nineteenth Session of the North American Forest Resources Commission*. Villahermosa, Mexico, November 16-20. Prepared for the Canadian Forest Service, Natural Resources Canada, by the National Aboriginal Forestry Association.
- Bombay, H.  
 1996 *Aboriginal Forestry-Based Ecological Knowledge in Canada*. Ottawa, Ontario: National Aboriginal Forestry Association.
- Cajete, G.  
 1999 *Igniting the Sparkle: An Indigenous Science Education Model*. Tucson, Arizona: Kivaki Press.
- Colorado, Pam  
 1988 Bridging Native and Western Science. *Convergence* 2/3:49-86.
- Graveline, Fyre Jean  
 1998 *Circle Works: Transforming Eurocentric Consciousness*. Fernwood, NS.

Johannes, R.E.

- 1993 Integrating Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Management with Environmental Impact Assessment, pp. 33-41 in J.T. Inglis (Editor): *Traditional Ecological Knowledge: Concepts and Cases*. IDRC, Ottawa, Ontario.

Johnson, M.

- 1992 *Lore: Capturing Traditional Environmental Knowledge*. Dene Cultural Institute and IDRC, Ottawa, Ontario.

Knudston, P. and David Suzuki

- 1992 *The Wisdom of the Elders*. Toronto, Ontario: Stoddart

LePena, F.

- 1997 Tradition Is Evidence for the Truth of Life, pp. 53-61 in L. Crozier-Hogle and D.B. Wilson (Editors): *Surviving in Two Worlds: Contemporary Native American Voices*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press.

Longclaws, Lyle

- 1994 Social Work and the Medicine Wheel Framework, in B.R. Compton and B. Galaway: *Social Work Processes*. Pacific Grover, California: Brooks/Cole.

Luckey, J.

- 1995 *Native and Non-Native Perspectives on Aboriginal Traditional Environmental Knowledge*. A Major Paper Submitted to the Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University, North York, Ontario.

Maguire, Patricia

- 1987 *Participatory Research: A Feminist Approach*. International School of Education, School of Education, University of Massachusetts.

Martin-Hill, D.

- 1995 *Lubicon Lake Nation: Spirit of Resistance*. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation. Anthropology Department. McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario.

McGregor, D.

- 1999 Indigenous Knowledge in Canada: Shifting Paradigms and the Influence of First Nation Advocates. *Conference Proceedings of Science and Practice: Sustaining the Boreal Forest*. Sustainable Forest Management Network, February 14-17, Edmonton, Alberta.

- McPherson, D. and J.D. Rabb  
 1996 Some Thoughts on Articulating a Native Philosophy. *Ayaang-waamizin* 1:3-11.
- Salmón, E.  
 1996 Decolonizing Our Voices. *Winds of Change*. Summer: 70-73.
- Simpson, Leanne R.  
 1999 *The Construction of Traditional Ecological Knowledge: Issues, Implications and Insights*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Graduate Studies, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba.
- Stevenson, M.G.  
 1999 What Are We Managing? Traditional Systems of Management and Knowledge in Cooperative and Joint Management. *Conference Proceedings of Science and Practice: Sustaining the Boreal Forest*. Sustainable Forest Management Network, February 14-17, Edmonton, Alberta.  
 1998 Traditional Knowledge and Environmental Management: From Commodity to Process. Prepared for The National Aboriginal Forestry Association Conference "Celebrating Partnerships", Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, September 14-18.  
 1997 Inuit and Co-Management: Principles, Practices and Challenges for the New Millennium. Prepared for the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, President's Office, Nuuk, Greenland.  
 1996 Indigenous Knowledge in Environmental Assessment. *Arctic* 49(3):278-291.
- Tuhiwai Smith, L.  
 1999 *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Zed Books, London, UK.
- Walsh, P.  
 1998 The Power of Maps. *Winds of Change*, Summer: 28-33.
- Warrior, Robert A.  
 1995 *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Widdoson, F. and A. Howard  
 1998 Natural Stewards or Profit-Makers? *Globe and Mail*.