

SFM Network  
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## Benefits of Aboriginal Land Use Studies

### Highlights

- Land use and occupancy studies document Aboriginal peoples' presence on traditional lands including the description of traditional and contemporary uses and relationships with the land.
- Involvement of people from the community is an essential part of planning and conducting land use studies.
- Benefits to Aboriginal peoples include:
  - Community empowerment in land use planning and decision-making;
  - Increased knowledge of, and experience with, traditional land use practices and cultural traditions; and
  - Enhanced social and cultural capital, especially preservation of Aboriginal values, knowledge, language, relationships with land and resources, and socially sanctioned roles and responsibilities.
- Benefits to governments and industries include increased communication with First Nations and a more grounded understanding of Aboriginal land and resource issues, including Aboriginal roles, rights and responsibilities.

**Since the 1970s**, there has been an increase in the number of land use studies undertaken by Aboriginal communities across Canada. Such studies have been instrumental in documenting Aboriginal presence on traditional lands and for describing their relationships with lands and resources. Sustainable forest management approaches are designed to sustain the social, ecological and economic values and capitals associated with Canadian forests for current and future generations. Documentation of traditional and current land uses can facilitate the participation of Aboriginal communities in regional land use and forest management planning and certification activities, and facilitate Aboriginal interests and rights in traditional lands and resources. Analyses of previously-conducted land use studies have identified several benefits and recommendations for conducting land use studies. This note summarizes these findings and suggests further readings below for those interested in a more detailed overview.

Land use studies document traditional and contemporary resource use and land occupancy by Aboriginal peoples through

interviews with community members, including both elders and contemporary land users. The information collected may increase knowledge about:

- Aboriginal seasonal activities and management systems;
- Ecological understanding of habitats critical to important animal populations (i.e. caribou migration, salmon spawning beds);

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- Cultural values and knowledge associated with land and resource uses;
  - Location of animal and plant harvesting sites, burial grounds, spiritual or sacred sites, trade and travel routes, cabins, and graves;
  - Aboriginal place names, stories, language, concepts, and management systems relating to lands and resources;
  - Fluctuations in, and recovery of, valued resources as a result of natural and anthropogenic change in ecosystems;
  - Contemporary resource use and the exercise of Aboriginal and treaty rights;
  - Aboriginal roles and responsibilities in sustaining desired ecosystem relationships.

## Legal and political requirement

Governments and industry may undertake land use studies in order to meet legal or political requirements. For example, the forest planning process in Ontario requires that Aboriginal values mapping (i.e. Aboriginal Background Information Report) be conducted. Although a unique legal requirement in Canada, the process faces some challenges, including lack of consistent and adequate funding, and lack of Aboriginal involvement. Experience has shown that inclusion of Aboriginal peoples in the planning and execution of land use studies enhances the probability of successful outcomes, and promotes strengthened relationships between government, industry and First Nations.

## Cultural documentation

Aboriginal peoples and governments may conduct studies in support of land title or compensation claims, to predict the impacts of development, to influence development, and to develop appropriate land use and economic development plans. Many groups have also found land use studies useful for documenting elders' oral histories and narratives in order to ensure that knowledge is passed down to future generations. Properly executed and used, land use studies initiated by Aboriginal peoples have the potential to empower communities, while contributing to the human, social and cultural capital of their communities. By documenting, assessing and prioritizing their land and resource uses, First Nations can support land planning initiatives affecting their future and be more involved in participatory planning processes within their communities and with government and industry.

## Land use planning

Today and through time, many forest dependent Aboriginal communities have faced the prospects of resource development and industrial activities on their traditional lands. Historically many First Nations peoples and communities have not benefited economically or socially from natural resource extraction. Additionally resource development and the associated infrastructural requirements have made it increasingly difficult to exercise Aboriginal and treaty rights (e.g., hunting, trapping, fishing, gathering etc.) due to the activities of oil, gas, mining and forestry companies.

Land use studies are often initiated by Aboriginal communities for two primary reasons. First, many Aboriginal peoples across Canada are interested in rebuilding and maintaining their culture. Documentation of historic land use and relationships with the land provides historic records, while assisting with knowledge transfer to other community members. Secondly, there is a greater interest in becoming more involved in land use planning and decision-making in order to sustain cultural values, social roles and responsibilities, to protect traditional lands and to benefit from resource development that occurs on these lands.

## Effects within the community

### *Maintenance of culture*

One goal of land use studies is to create a record of land use and occupancy that allows the community to maintain its culture through generations. Many Aboriginal peoples fear that their culture, typically passed down through personal oral histories and narratives, will be lost once elders are gone. Traditional land use studies can be useful as an educational tool in maintaining culture. Just as importantly, land use studies establish and reinforce Aboriginal claims, rights and responsibilities to land and resources, which are critical to sustaining cultural values and traditions.

Land use studies play an important role in teaching young people about traditional place names, language and ways of relating to lands and resources—an important aspect of sustaining cultural and biological diversity. For example, the results of a traditional use study conducted by the Dene Tha' in northern Alberta are currently being used in one of the community schools to teach children about the Dene Tha' culture. Research has shown that land use studies encourage greater communication and sharing of land use knowledge and values among local peoples, helping to sustain social capital and to restore and maintain the traditional culture.



Land use studies can encourage sharing of cultural information between generations. Here, elders Matthew Strang and Oliver Hill from the Pikangikum First Nation (Northwestern Ontario) discuss ways to incorporate indigenous values and knowledge in forest management. Reggie Peters, a community translator, translates between Anishinabe and English. Photo courtesy of I. Creed.

### *Enhancement of traditional uses of land*

Enhancing traditional uses of the land is important to many First Nations for several reasons. First, it allows them to meet basic sustenance needs—primarily through supporting a “bush meat” economy which is nutritionally superior to store-bought foods in many communities. This allows them to be more self-sufficient, healthier, and be less reliant on government aid to support themselves and future generations. Moreover, productive activity on the land contributes to the physical, psychological and spiritual well-being of community members. Traditional and some contemporary land use activities also function to support social roles and responsibilities (social capital), while sustaining Aboriginal identity, cultural values and language. Lastly, they illustrate a presence on the land—something that is crucial in establishing land rights, title and compensation claims, and for demonstrating the effects of development on traditional livelihoods.



Some Aboriginal peoples feel that the completion of land use studies actually encourages traditional usage of land. For instance, some interviewed participants of the Dene Tha' First Nation, claimed that "use of the land has increased, there is more moose meat and more wild meat." In the same study, it was believed by many participants that the use of the Dene Tha' land use study as a reference guide in summer camps for youth would continue to lead to greater awareness of and engagement in traditional land use activities.

### *Identification of important sites*

Most Aboriginal communities see the identification and preservation of important places on the land—including campsites, graves, ceremonial locations, spiritual and historical sites, plus hunting, trapping and gathering areas—as a key goal of land use studies. Many land use locations shift seasonally in space and may be scattered over large areas. All of these places are increasingly subject to disturbance or development through industrial activities including forestry, hydro, and oil/gas.

The identification of important places highlights Aboriginal presence on the land, while maintaining important knowledge and connections through the generations. There is a fundamental relationship between such places and Aboriginal peoples' well-being. It is critical, then, that these places—and the narratives that give them meaning and value—are known in order to preserve this all important connection. Land use studies do a good job of documenting land use and places, but study results are not static. Periodic updates are necessary as land use locations and activities change in time, space and scope.

### *Training and employment*

Land use studies are most effective when driven by the Aboriginal community. This may provide various training and employment opportunities through the completion of the study itself, using the study results to plan and implement a sustainable future for the community, and through increased involvement of the Aboriginal community with government and industry representatives.

Increased engagement with industry and government may result in new training and employment opportunities for some in the community. Community awareness of new development projects may be enhanced through the consultation process for the traditional land use study resulting in greater community involvement in the planning process associated with development. This may result in additional benefits in terms of additional training and employment opportunities for community members or for opportunities for contracts for community-member owned companies.

## **Effects on relationships with others**

### *Awareness and recognition of the Aboriginal rights, roles and responsibilities*

Land use studies can be an effective tool to sustain Aboriginal peoples, their culture and their relationships to the land and to each other. They provide a useful method of transferring knowledge to non-community members, industry and governments. Many Aboriginal peoples hope that land use studies can serve as a basis for recognition of their rights and responsibilities which, in turn, could result in real and meaningful participation in land and resource use management planning.

Forest management planning in many jurisdictions in Canada, as well as forest certification standards based on SFM principles, have incorporated criteria and indicators to ensure fair and effective involvement of Aboriginal and First Nation communities in planning processes. However, proponents of these land use studies emphasize the need for a political or legal framework that recognizes, supports and ensures Aboriginal rights and participation in management processes to further enhance the outcome of these studies and integrate processes across all resource sectors.



### **Protection of traditional uses and cultural places**

Aboriginal land use studies can promote the protection of specific traditional places and cultural uses within an area, as well as larger land bases, by providing information to provincial or regional planning processes on traditional and contemporary use, and creating a greater awareness of the positive and negative effects of resource development on their communities. However, research and experience has demonstrated there are many issues related to protected area status (including regulatory and institutional challenges) therefore making it more difficult to successfully protect larger areas used for hunting, trapping, and gathering. Again, there is a need to recognize that land use studies are living documents which should be continually updated and utilized to actively promote the transfer and application of study results in participatory planning processes that may arise.

### **Communication with government and industry**

Improved communication between Aboriginal communities and industrial and government sectors have been noted following traditional land use studies. Resulting consultation processes are generally more robust and lead to enhanced opportunities for two-way sharing of information. Such dialogue may result in an increased role for the Aboriginal community in terms of involvement in resource planning as well as an increased recognition of their rights, concerns and need to be involved in resource development activities on their traditional lands. Although land use planning exercises have been found to be beneficial to many communities, concerns still persist for many Aboriginal peoples regarding use of these study results by government and industry due to proprietary information, compensation, misconceptions and resource access issues.

## **Management Recommendations**

1. Land use studies should be viewed as ongoing processes. It is impossible to document all relevant information in one study and, equally important, land use changes over time and space. These studies should not be viewed as static reports of an “ancient” time, but, rather, “traditional” should be viewed as something that remains very much a part of the contemporary culture. In this regard, land use studies should be periodically updated by the community (e.g., every five years or so).
2. Land use studies should be participatory in nature. The benefits of a community-based approach are evident in terms of benefits or positive impacts on Aboriginal communities. When land use studies are conducted with community approval and active participation, the results are more likely to benefit the community, particularly when used for planning and community development.
3. Land use studies should be conducted as part of a meaningful planning process within existing political or legal frameworks. Land use studies are not meant to be stand-alone documents or solely “tools” for industry and government to use when planning for resource development. They are designed to contribute to meaningful processes with the people whose history, activities and knowledge they document. Land use studies can be used by Aboriginal peoples as a way of assessing the effects of development on their land and of participating meaningfully in subsequent land use planning activities and developments.



## Further reading

Garvin, T., S. Nelson, E. Ellehoj and B. Redmond. 2001. *A Guide to Conducting a Traditional Knowledge and Land Use Study*. Natural Resources Canada, Edmonton, AB.

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Written by: Kristin Kopra and Marc Stevenson

The views, conclusions and recommendations contained in this publication are those of the authors and should not be construed as endorsement by the Sustainable Forest Management Network.

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