Ethics and Research with Aboriginal Communities

Marc G. Stevenson

THE SUSTAINABLE FOREST MANAGEMENT NETWORK

Established in 1995, the Sustainable Forest Management Network (SFM Network) is an incorporated, non-profit research organization based at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

The SFM Network's mission is to:
• Deliver an internationally-recognized, interdisciplinary program that undertakes relevant university-based research;
• Develop networks of researchers, industry, government, Aboriginal, and non-government organization partners;
• Offer innovative approaches to knowledge transfer; and
• Train scientists and advanced practitioners to meet the challenges of natural resource management.

The SFM Network receives about 60% of its $7 million annual budget from the Networks of Centres of Excellence (NCE) Program, a Canadian initiative sponsored by the NSERC, SSHRC, and CIHR research granting councils. Other funding partners include the University of Alberta, governments, forest industries, Aboriginal groups, non-governmental organizations, and the BIOCAP Canada Foundation (through the Sustainable Forest Management Network/BIOCAP Canada Foundation Joint Venture Agreement).

KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE AND TECHNOLOGY EXTENSION PROGRAM

The SFM Network completed approximately 334 research projects from 1995 – 2008. These projects enhanced the knowledge and understanding of many aspects of the boreal forest ecosystem, provided unique training opportunities for both graduate and undergraduate students and established a network of partnerships across Canada between researchers, government, forest companies and Aboriginal communities.

The SFM Network's research program was designed to contribute to the transition of the forestry sector from sustained yield forestry to sustainable forest management. Two key elements in this transition include:
• Development of strategies and tools to promote ecological, economic and social sustainability, and
• Transfer of knowledge and technology to inform policy makers and affect forest management practices.

In order to accomplish this transfer of knowledge, the research completed by the Network must be provided to the Network Partners in a variety of forms. The KETE Program is developing a series of tools to facilitate knowledge transfer to their Partners. The Partners' needs are highly variable, ranging from differences in institutional arrangements or corporate philosophies to the capacity to interpret and implement highly technical information. An assortment of strategies and tools is required to facilitate the exchange of information across scales and to a variety of audiences.

The KETE documents represent one element of the knowledge transfer process, and attempt to synthesize research results, from research conducted by the Network and elsewhere in Canada, into a SFM systems approach to assist foresters, planners and biologists with the development of alternative approaches to forest management planning and operational practices.

Knowledge Exchange and Technology Extension Program (KETE)
Sustainable Forest Management Network

Ethics and Research with Aboriginal Communities

By

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Preface

This paper is based on ethical principles introduced in a chapter by Marc G. Stevenson entitled *Negotiating Research Relationships with Aboriginal Communities: Ethical Considerations and Principles* (Stevenson and Natcher 2009: 197-210). The reader is encouraged to consult this work for a better understanding of the full context in which these ethical principles were first presented. The following principles have been prepared to assist researchers and research partners conduct research involving Aboriginal peoples. The intent of the principles is to promote research that is scientifically and culturally competent, is in keeping with Aboriginal values and traditions, and is mutually beneficial and empowering to both Canada's Aboriginal and research communities. Adherence to these principles will also facilitate, in the context of research, the reconciliation of Aboriginal rights and interests with those of other Canadians.

The principles are written primarily for, and are applicable to, researchers of both the natural and social sciences with little or no first hand knowledge of Aboriginal issues and cultures. They are not written for, nor should they be substituted for policy recommendations concerning Canada's Aboriginal community. Many First Nation and Metis governments, communities and organizations already have drafted their own principles, guidelines, protocols and codes of conduct for researchers. These ethical principles[2] address the special considerations that arise when researchers carry out research that involves Aboriginal peoples in Canada and should be followed by anyone considering such research.

These ethical principles for research with Aboriginal peoples draw on the author's long term field experience conducting research with Aboriginal peoples, 10 or more years of Sustainable Forest Management Network research linked to Aboriginal peoples, and borrow heavily from research guidelines and principles developed by other organizations and initiatives (see Appendix B.) While the convergence of several of these guidelines and principles is remarkable, the *CIHR Guidelines for Health Research Involving Aboriginal People* (2007) are noteworthy because they were developed by an Aboriginal Ethics Working Group that followed a comprehensive nation-wide consultation strategy with over 500 people from Canada's Aboriginal and research communities. Researchers are encouraged to refer to and take note of these guidelines as well as other regulatory and Tri-Council (NSERC-SSHRC-MRCC) policies involving research with Aboriginal peoples. The following principles capture and expand on the principles embraced in guidelines already developed. They are intended to enable and facilitate, rather than suppress or obstruct, ethical and mutually beneficial research with Aboriginal peoples and communities. As Linda Smith (1999:15) reminds us in *Decolonizing Methodologies*, it is no longer acceptable for researchers to:

> *"…regard the values and beliefs, practices and customs of (Indigenous) communities as 'barriers' to research or as exotic customs with which researchers need to be familiar in order to carry out their work without causing offence. Indigenous methodologies tend to approach cultural*

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[2] For Brant Castellano, 'ethics' "refers to rules of conduct that express and reinforce important social and culture values of a society" (Brant Castellano 2004:99), Thus, "ethics, the rules of right behavior, are intimately related to who you are, the deep values you subscribe to, and your understanding of your place in the spiritual order of reality" (2004: 103).

protocols, values and behaviours as an integral part of methodology. They are 'factors' to be built in to research explicitly, to be though about reflexively, to be declared openly as part of the research design, to be discussed as part of the final results of a study and to be disseminated back to the people in culturally appropriate ways and in a language that can be understood."

It is important to point out that the principles presented here are not guidelines per se, a "how to" instruction manual, or a check-list for researchers. They are simply principles to be applied when conceiving, planning and executing research where Aboriginal people are partners or otherwise involved. Furthermore, it is necessary that this kind of research include a research agreement negotiated early in the project development process with the responsible representatives of the Aboriginal communities concerned. While there has been discussion around the need for national guidelines (SSHRC 2003), there is also the sense that the solution may lie in creating effective research protocols at local levels to accommodate individual differences among various Aboriginal peoples (e.g., the Blackfoot emphasize approval by responsible individuals not community political representatives, while in other Aboriginal communities approvals are given by families who are responsible for various kinds of knowledge). The point is that research guidelines with Aboriginal communities are to be negotiated on a case-by-case basis, and included as part of the research agreement. This approach addresses the need for openness and co-operation in the search for new knowledge without prescribing a protocol that could prove inhibiting. The intent of the following principles is to provide researchers with a list of ethical issues they need to consider when negotiating and developing equitable research relationships with Aboriginal peoples and communities.

Ethical Space and Research Partnerships

The inclusion of Aboriginal peoples in research as partners and not just subjects of research is becoming increasingly common across Canada's academic landscape. This sense of partnership is based on the recognition of a changed place for Aboriginals in Canadian society and promotes moving forward together for mutual interest and gain (from research) in ways that respect the rights and ethical spaces of each party. Thus, the emerging sense of research partnership between Canada's academic and Aboriginal communities needs to be based on "mutual dedication to shared research objectives, to patterns of innovation we have really never tried, and to collaborative approaches which by their very energy and creativity would move powerfully, yet in quiet ways, against any residual colonial or inequitable relations" (SSHRC 2003:17).

Recognition of the fact that Aboriginal peoples and their knowledge, values, insights and understandings may have much to contribute to the concept of sustainability with our natural world is reason enough to foster a research partnership focused on environmental issues. The proposed principles are to help create the "ethical space" for this to happen and seek to change existing

institutions and relationships that fall short in this regard. Where two or more cultural communities meet, such as when non-Aboriginal researchers involve Aboriginal people in their research, there may be a need to reconcile knowledge differences in ways that respect and protect the ethical spaces of each. It is particularly important that western-trained researchers respect, understand and acknowledge the validity of Aboriginal ethical space (CIHR 2007:17), and come to terms with the potential impacts of their research on this ethical space and Aboriginal peoples' rights to self-determination.

The Two Row Wampum: A Metaphor

The two row wampum sets out the principles for ethical research relationships between peoples of different cultures. The two rows illustrate each peoples travelling parallel to each other, each distinct in its own right, neither trying to influence the others path (Stevenson and Webb 2003). It is a metaphor of international relationships, setting out the basis of relationships between peoples. It is also an ethical theory when it talks of respect, dignity, honesty and kindness as the principles for relationships…. "We ought to remember that the space between the rows is a place of conversation, discussion and debate" (David Newhouse in SSHRC 2003:18). The challenge in any research partnership with Aboriginal peoples is to "ensure that enough time, money and energy is provided to allow Aboriginal systems of knowledge to retrieve a stronger footing in their own right" (SSHRC 2003:18).

Figure 1. The two-row wampum belt.

Another cornerstone of any research partnership with Aboriginal communities is the commitment to shift the research paradigm from one in which outside experts identify and seek solutions to problems/issues/opportunities confronted by Aboriginal communities, to one in which Aboriginal peoples identify the issues, conduct research and facilitate the solutions themselves (SSHRC 2003:5). This requires attention and a commitment to building local research capacity. This is not only ethical, it makes sense from multiple perspectives; who better to accurately assess and identify problems, and to envision, construct and implement viable solutions to them?

Ethical Principles[3]

A.   Research involving Aboriginal people or subjects has to be undertaken in partnership

A partnership-based approach to research involving Aboriginal people or subjects demonstrates a recognition of the independence and integrity of Aboriginal people and the need for research to be equitable. It is important that mutual respect be

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[3] See Appendix A for a summary list of ethical principles.

formalized in an agreement for the research to proceed in a manner that implies shared understanding and expectations. Researchers must also be able to accept a rejection of their research proposal.

B. The research process must be transparent with full disclosure and informed consent

Aboriginal peoples and communities involved in research must be fully informed about the nature and scope of research, including purpose, sponsorship, methods and community involvement. Initial consultations with the Aboriginal community should establish who speaks for the community and has the authority to do so. First contact can be initiated by a letter of intent setting out the ideas, goals, and intentions of the research and delivered to the relevant Aboriginal authority, followed by face-to-face meetings.

Researchers must obtain the full and informed consent of local authorities as well as any or all persons or groups participating in the research. Consent of the people involved needs to be sought and confirmed before the research commences as well as on an on-going basis - as the project evolves. Researchers must respect the rights of the community and its members who choose not to participate in research, and no pressure or coercion, however subtle, should be applied to induce participation.

The objective of full disclosure and informed consent is to ensure that Aboriginal participants fully understand the purpose of the research and what their participation involves. This includes:

- the level of commitment;

- the benefits and risks to the community or any person;

- the amount and type of remuneration;

- the extent of involvement in the production, analysis and validation of research results;

- the ownership and control of information/data resulting from the research process;

- third party access to research results; and

- the extent of authorship in any publication arising from the research, etc.

Full disclosure of any deviances from the agreed upon research plan or agreement that may impact community members will ensure transparency of research process and foster good working relationships. .

C. Researchers must recognize and fulfill appropriate social obligations

"Research that seeks objectivity by maintaining distance between the investigator and the informants violates Aboriginal ethics of reciprocal relationships and collective validation. If the researcher assumes control

of knowledge production, harvesting information in brief encounters, the dialogical relationship with human and non-human sources is disrupted and the transformation of observations or information into contextualized knowledge is aborted" (Brant Castellano 2004:105).

Most activities in Aboriginal communities, including research, take place in a social context, and research partnerships with Aboriginal peoples and communities are, first and foremost, social relationships. Therefore research partnerships carry with them certain obligations, privileges and responsibilities. Much of the resistance exhibited by Aboriginal communities towards outside researchers stems directly from the failure of the latter to understand, respect and honour this fact. The existing social structures and relationships in Aboriginal communities (including internal and external social capital) need to be respected and protected, and not interfered with during the research. Researchers must respect the privacy and dignity of individuals, local protocols and any or all individual and collective rights of Aboriginal peoples.

Research relationships should not be exploitive or coercive. Rather they should be developed and nurtured in the interests of both the academic community and the Aboriginal community. Researchers should understand their broader responsibilities and accountability to the community when entering into research relationships with Aboriginal peoples (CIHR 2007:17). The researcher has to co-operate with the Aboriginal community to protect it and its citizens from any negative impacts of the research that might result from the findings or data of the project being made public. At the same time, researchers working with Aboriginal communities also have an obligation to share their results, knowledge and expertise to create a mutual two-way learning environment in the course of the research and to build local capacity in the research process.

Aboriginal peoples are increasingly prepared to engage in research as partners conducting research within Aboriginal knowledge traditions and using Aboriginal methodologies as well as those drawn from their interaction with non-Aboriginal intellectual traditions. As part of the mutual benefit of engaging Aboriginal peoples and accessing Aboriginal knowledge in the research process, researchers should make every effort to transfer to Aboriginal peoples and communities relevant skill sets and knowledge that facilitates their empowerment in the research process. Skilled Aboriginal researchers are a critical invaluable, irreplaceable asset, and offer important opportunities to develop unique insights and viable `home-grown' solutions to issues faced by Aboriginal communities.

D.   Ethicial space for Aboriginal people and knowledge in research needs to be created

"Researchers as knowledge brokers are people who have the power to construct legitimating arguments for or against ideas, theories or practices. They are collectors of information and producers of meaning, which can be used for, or against Indigenous interests" (University of Victoria 2003).

Aboriginal knowledge (traditional knowledge, indigenous knowledge, etc.) must be viewed as both unique and valuable knowledge in its own right, with its own functions and processes of validation. As more and more attention is directed to accumulating Aboriginal knowledge, especially over a broader geographic base, it is valuable to realize that knowledge held by many Aboriginal peoples arises and exists outside the confines of positivistic science. Non-aboriginal peoples cultured or schooled in the scientific tradition have tended to view other knowledge systems as anecdotal or inferior. Yet, "science" too contains value-laden assumptions, so that no one system or worldview has a monopoly on the truth. Rather multiple worldviews and voices are needed to address the challenges at hand and develop a sustainable relationship with our natural world. Researchers who undertake projects that embrace Aboriginal peoples or issues related to them have an obligation to maintain and protect the integrity and context of Aboriginal knowledge gained in the process. Researchers wishing to access Aboriginal knowledge as part of their research must respect any local and other (regional) formal protocols in place.

In an attempt to make complex knowledge tractable, local Aboriginal knowledge is often at risk of being separated from the context in which it was situated. In particular, researchers must avoid `cherry-picking', de-contextualizing and transforming knowledge or information held by Aboriginal peoples into specific forms or "currencies" acceptable to scientific practice. At the same time, the authenticity or validity of orally transmitted Aboriginal knowledge and/or Aboriginal knowledge must be assessed by locally approved and culturally appropriate means of validation, and not dependent upon scientifically approved methodologies and criteria.

Researchers must recognize and avoid the misuse and abuse of power in their relationships with Aboriginal peoples. Researchers are enriched by the economic, political, educational and others systems of which they are a part. Moreover, they engage Aboriginal and other vulnerable peoples from positions of power and influence of which they are largely unaware. Rules of engagement in the research process must be negotiated, not unilaterally set or assumed by one party. In particular, the language that Aboriginal knowledge and concepts are expressed and described in, like all rules of engagement in research, must be negotiated. In this developing relationship between science and Aboriginal knowledge, both bodies of knowledge and their methods need to have. The ethical space in which to function independently, and where possible, together in a spirit of mutual respect, co-existence and cooperation.

It has already been argued that rules of engagement in the research process must be negotiated, not set by one party. In particular and out of respect, the language that Aboriginal knowledge and concepts are expressed and described in, like all rules of engagement in research, must be negotiated. The language, knowledge, and cultural values and traditions of Aboriginal peoples are strongly interconnected to use of the environment. Research activities should be designed to strengthen, not erode, the human, intellectual, social and cultural capitals of Aboriginal communities, and their interrelationships. Researchers also have an obligation to Aboriginal peoples, and to society at large, to facilitate opportunities for Aboriginal peoples to contribute their unique language, concepts and

understandings to the research process. In fact, researchers may have a special obligation to assist Aboriginal peoples to reconfigure existing institutions and to develop new ones that create the ethical space for their knowledge and knowledge holders in environmental research, policy and decision-making.

E.   Research relationships must be negotiated

"The gathering of information and its subsequent use are inherently political. In the past, Aboriginal peoples have not been consulted about what information should be collected, who should gather that information, who should maintain it, and who should have access to it. The information gathered may or may not have been relevant to the questions, priorities and concerns of Aboriginal peoples. Because data gathering has frequently been imposed by outside authorities, it has met with resistance in many quarters" (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1993).

Research relationships with Aboriginal peoples and communities will be at risk unless those relationships are negotiated. Unilaterally developed and imposed research agendas have failed in the past and led to unreconciled relationships. Because research is inherently political, the space required for the ethical engagement of Aboriginal peoples and their knowledge in research should be negotiated on a nation-a-nation basis. The goal of negotiations is to find a mutually acceptable path upon which to undertake research in the best interests of both parties. Researchers must understand and reach agreement with the Aboriginal community as to what is expected of them and endeavour to fulfill these expectations to the best of their abilities. Research agreements should be negotiated and formalized with the appropriate community authorities before research commences.

There is a risk that some researchers with only tentative experience with Aboriginal communities will arrive with their own research questions and methodologies intact. A lack of understanding for Aboriginal peoples and their knowledge traditions, a lack of research benefits to Aboriginal communities, and a lack of control over intellectual and cultural property are some of the complaints directed at outside research agents by Aboriginal peoples. These trends are fortunately disappearing and increasingly researchers portray themselves less as external experts than committed partners attempting to ensure that research directly benefits Aboriginal nations and communities. At the same time, Aboriginal peoples no longer wish to be passive subjects or participants, but instead are becoming full partners in research. Research questions are increasingly formulated with the intention of addressing Aboriginal needs, interests and concerns, in addition to those of the researcher. The closer these two research agendas can be brought together, the more enriching and empowering the research process and the greater potential for the creation of new knowledge, insights and solutions to important issues and questions.

Some of the terms and conditions[4] that might be considered in the development of research agreements with Aboriginal peoples and communities include:

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[4] See Appendix A for a summary list of terms and conditions.

a. Aboriginal involvement in the design and execution of research

For studies located in Aboriginal communities, researchers need to work collaboratively to establish procedures that enable community representatives to participate in the design, planning, execution and evaluation of research, specifying the particulars associated with each.

b. Benefit sharing and remuneration for participation in research

Aboriginal peoples and communities should receive fair and equitable benefits for their contributions to research activities. Benefit sharing should be regarded as a way to strengthen and empower Aboriginal communities and should be equitable within and among groups. This could include honorariums for elders, salaries and payment schedules for community-based project personnel, local training/skills development for community members, etc.. Individuals who contribute their knowledge to the project should be paid for his/her expertise and time, not their knowledge or information per se. Knowledge is not a commodity and many Aboriginal peoples feel that they have an ethical obligation to share it.

c. Fair and impartial representation of the community

Community-based studies require researchers to ensure that a representative cross-section of community experiences and perceptions are included. Failure to do so can skew research results and exacerbate social tensions within the community. In particular, in portraying community life, the multiplicity of viewpoints present within Aboriginal communities should be represented fairly, including viewpoints specific to age, gender, social status and economic position. It is important that research directors learn of the sensitivities that can be hidden in the social dynamics of any community, and exercise discretion in anticipating release of information that could be considered confidential or in any way injurious to community relations.

d. Representation of Aboriginal knowledge and worldview

All reasonable best efforts should be made by research project leaders to determine the preferred means by which Aboriginal community citizens, both individually and collectively, wish to have their knowledge represented or presented. Researchers have an ethical obligation to inform themselves, and make it clear to Aboriginal peoples taking

part in research, of any potential impacts or implications from representing Aboriginal knowledge in the lexicons of non-Aboriginal languages and science.

e. Aboriginal ownership and control of research results

The rights of Aboriginal peoples, individually and collectively, to maintain control of their lives and institutions extend to research and its results. Aboriginal communities are within their rights to control both specific and general impacts of each aspect of research from conception to completion. In particular, they retain the absolute right or ownership to control information they contributed, and to restrict access to it including withdrawal of all or part from the research reporting. It is very important that Aboriginal peoples and communities remain the rightful owners of their knowledge, and researchers must respect this and act accordingly. Aboriginal organizations and governments may already have established formal protocols concerning their knowledge which should be respected. Any departures from these protocols should only occur with prior agreement. It is the researcher's responsibility to clarify with the Aboriginal community and research participants how agreed controls are to be exercised.

f. Access to knowledge/information provided by an Aboriginal community and individuals

An Aboriginal community owns its knowledge collectively in the same way that individuals own their personal information. Both individuals and the community are entitled to retain and control access to information generated by and about themselves in research, including research reports and the data upon which research findings are based. Research agreements should specify the conditions upon which third party access is permissible.

g. Review of research findings by Aboriginal authority/community

Any agreed protocol for research should provide the opportunity for the Aboriginal community and its citizens to review and comment on research findings at the project end and, where appropriate, during the research project. Such protocols can also address the wishes of the Aboriginal community to restrict publication or dissemination of project results that may adversely impact project participants and/or misrepresent their value, knowledge and management systems.

h. Presentation and communication of research results

Upon completion of any project researchers are obligated to distribute research findings as widely as possible within

participating communities, particularly to those who provided information, knowledge and/or wisdom for the analysis. Every effort should be made to present research results in formats that are easily accessed and understood by the community. This may require non-technical English, written and/or easily comprehended graphic or visual summaries. In some instances a summary of results could involve highly contextualized, complex oral communications prepared in the local Aboriginal language. A communication plan, specifying mutually agreed upon deliverables and modes of delivery, should be developed as part of any research plan.

i. **Recognition of Aboriginal contributions to research**

Conventionally, research reports are rigorous about proper citations for credit, and all efforts need to be made to accord the same respect for Aboriginal participants in research projects. In many cases the research would not have been possible without their involvement and Aboriginal participants and personnel need to be fairly recognized for their contributions.

Conclusion

The above principles are few in number, but richly textured and multi-layered. Research partnerships negotiated with Aboriginal peoples and communities that embrace these ethical considerations can produce a far greater return on investment than research relationships that ignore or trivialize them. Some of the terms and conditions that these ethical principles evoke may seem onerous at first glance, especially for those not used to working with Aboriginal communities. However, they are intended to enable, not obstruct, the development of ethical and mutually beneficial research partnerships. In the words of Willie Ermine (2007:202-03):

> *"The dimension of the dialogue might seem overwhelming because it will involve and encompass issues like language, distinct histories, knowledge traditions, values, interests, and social, economic and political realities and how these impact and influence an agreement to interact. Even so, …the new partnership model of the ethical space, in a cooperative spirit between Indigenous peoples and Western institutions, will create new currents of thought that flow in different directions and overrun the old ways of thinking (emphasis added)."*

Researchers who embrace these principles stand to be rewarded in many ways, many times over, and knowledge in general stands to gain by creating the ethical space for Aboriginal peoples' knowledge and understanding in research. The ethical principles are intended to facilitate collective action towards solving some of the most pressing environmental and social issues that Canadians face today.

Appendix A

Summary List of Ethical Principles to follow when conducting research involving Aboriginal peoples and communities

1. Research involving Aboriginal people or subjects has to be equitable and undertaken in partnership

2. The research process must be transparent with full disclosure and informed consent

3. Researchers must recognize and fulfill appropriate social obligations

4. Ethical space for Aboriginal people and knowledge in research needs to be created

5. Research relationships must be negotiated

Summary List of Terms and Conditions to consider when developing research agreements with Aboriginal peoples and communities

a. Aboriginal involvement in the design and execution of research

b. Benefit sharing and remuneration for participation in research

c. Fair and impartial representation of the community

d. Representation of Aboriginal knowledge and worldview

e. Aboriginal ownership and control of research results

f. Access to knowledge/information provided by an Aboriginal community and individuals

g. Review of research findings by Aboriginal authority/community

h. Presentation and communication of research results

i. Recognition of Aboriginal contributions to research

Appendix B

Research Principles, Guidelines, and Other Sources Consulted

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