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**Sustaining Aboriginal  
boreal forest communities:  
Exploring alternatives**

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**Sustaining Aboriginal  
Boreal Forest Communities:  
Exploring Alternatives**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Sustainable Forest Management Network research project, “Sustaining Aboriginal Boreal Forest communities: Exploring Alternatives” involves three components: Traditional Land Use and Occupancy Studies (TLUOS), Co-management of forest resources, and an assessment of forest tenure systems in light of the particular values and needs of Aboriginal communities. Research data from these projects can be summarized as follows.

1. The impact of TLUOS has been limited. The studies have been completed and have raised the awareness of First Nation peoples of traditional land uses and values. At the same time there is little use by government and industry officials of the studies to facilitate an integrated process for resource management.
2. The concept of co-management implies equal participation on the part of all parties involved in managing forest resources. First Nation peoples have been involved in a co-management process but unfortunately not on an equal basis. It has been difficult to change the traditional forest allocation and harvesting process dominated by government and industry.
3. The above problems may have a critical link to the forest tenure system for First Nations. The existing tenure system is structured to accommodate the provincial government and industry, and Aboriginal peoples are forced to work within that system. Changing the forest tenure system might give First Nations a more equal position in an integrated forest management process.

Thus, changes in the use of TLUOS, changes in the co-management process, and changes in the forest tenure system are needed to give First Nations an opportunity to become more formal partners in forest management. These changes will require public policy changes, and they may be key to economic development in Aboriginal communities.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In 1999-2000, the Sustainable Forest Management Network research project at the Arctic Institute of North America (AINA) continued its search for meaningful Aboriginal involvement in forest decision-making. The three key components of this research are: Traditional Land Use and Occupancy Studies (TLUOS); Co-management of forest resources; and an assessment of forest tenure systems in light of the particular values and needs of Aboriginal communities. Research in the three areas was conducted in partnership between AINA and three Aboriginal First Nations, Dene Thá, Fort McKay and Kituskeenow. Objectives of the components were (1) in Aboriginal Communities, determine the value of traditional land use patterns and places and their role in managing forest resources, (2) in Aboriginal Communities, determine if Co-management can be a tool for Aboriginal participation in forest resource management, and (3) to determine the influence of forest tenure systems on First Nation involvement in managing forest resources. In 1999/2000 the basic research on these projects was completed. Now we are in a position to assess their impact, to draw conclusions, and to determine how these conclusions might lead to policy proposals regarding Aboriginal communities and integrated forest resource management.

### **TRADITIONAL LAND USE AND OCCUPANCY STUDIES**

The TLUOS were designed to establish First Nations traditional knowledge of places and processes on lands surrounding their communities. The hope was that establishing these traditional places and processes would be a first step in involving Aboriginal people in the management of forest resources. The questions is, have these studies had an impact on integrating the management of forest resources? Have they been used by governments in allocating forest resources? Or, have they been used by industry in harvesting these resources?

At this point in time, the conclusion is negative (Robinson, Ross 1997; MacKinnon, Apentiik, Robinson 1999). It is clear that, while the TLUOS are recognized, they are not being used in the allocation of harvesting of forest resources. Data from the studies indicate clearly the need for a more “collaborative” (MacKinnon, Apentiik, Robinson 1999:26) approach in which officials from government and industry would work together in the management of forest harvesting. It is clear there is no incentive for Aboriginal peoples to be considered as partners in the planning of forest management. Moreover, it was determined that the government was the logical “convenor” (ibid. 25) of all parties as a first step in moving toward a more collaborative process of integrated forest management. This lack of coordination and collaboration needs to be addressed in terms of public policy alternatives.

Current research (2000/2001) involves an assessment of the impact of TLUOS in Aboriginal communities. These studies are in progress. The theoretical framework in which this assessment will be examined involves how “intervention” in Aboriginal communities has consequences. The TLUOS are a form of intervention. The consequences of this intervention

affect the community as a whole as well as individuals who reside in the community. At this point we feel there is sufficient evidence to support generalizations about the impact the studies are having. Once we establish the impact of the studies, we will have a better picture of the relationship between government, industry and First Nation communities in managing forest resources. We will then be able to suggest policies that could lead to greater involvement by Aboriginal people in the management of resources. And of course this involvement in resource management may in turn lead to greater economic development for the Aboriginal communities.

## **CO-MANAGEMENT OF FOREST RESOURCES**

Co-management has been perceived as a means for involving First Nations in forest resource management. Indeed, the idea has generated a great deal of hope and expectations by Aboriginal peoples, and often is seen as a way to integrate forest resource management (Chambers 1999).

In reality, co-management experiences in Canada are very different. There have been positive developments with co-management. For example, involvement by First Nation's peoples with government and industry officials has resulted in a greater appreciation of traditional knowledge and values. In effect, this involvement has led to a greater appreciation of the "cultural differences" between a modern industrial society and a more traditional, Aboriginal society (ibid. 22). At the same time, co-management as practised by forest resource stakeholders is more likely to manifest "consultation and cooperation" but not literally co-management (ibid.21). There are a number of reasons for this difference in perception and reality, not the least of which is the lack of ownership by First Nations of the forest resource and the lack of clear recognition, and understanding of Aboriginal and Treaty rights. Traditionally, the province and the industry have allocated and harvested the resources. And obviously it is difficult for these two parties to accept First Nations as an equal partner in co-managing the resource.

In short, co-management has not led to an integrated process of forest management. And again, this finding should lead to policy recommendations designed to rectify the situation by involving First Nation people more directly in managing the forest resource.

## **FOREST TENURE SYSTEMS AND MANAGING FOREST RESOURCES**

Forest tenure is a critical and certainly a contentious issue with First Nations. In fact, a specific forest tenure system may be the key to integrated forest management and economic development for Aboriginal communities within the Boreal forest.

The existing forest resource allocation structures were not developed with the intention of providing First Nations with access to forest resources. In their search to gain improved access to forest resources (e.g. through co-management agreements or joint ventures), First Nations are

obliged to operate within the confines of the existing tenure system. Aboriginal communities face great difficulty in attempting to reconcile traditional community values and institutions with provincially imposed regulations and requirements. Further, the provincial system of rights allocation does not recognize existing Aboriginal and Treaty rights. The purpose of our research is to bring to light these issues and to identify the legal and policy changes needed to accommodate the needs and rights of First Nations and those of industrial forestry.

## **CONCLUSION**

The SFM Network Project “Sustaining Aboriginal Boreal Forest Communities: Exploring Alternatives,” (1999/2000), includes three components. Conclusions from research in each of the components are becoming clear. These conclusions, however, may be altered by the final results of research now being conducted in First Nation communities (2000/2001).

The results of TLUOS are of value, especially for First Nation peoples. For the results of these studies to have full impact, however, adjustments must be made by officials from the provincial government and industry. The problem is that the studies have been recognized but not used. Clearly, there is a need for greater cooperation and collaboration on the part of all parties before there is in fact an integrated process of resource management in northern Alberta.

Co-management does represent one way that First Nations can become involved in managing forest resources. However, again adjustment must be made by government and industry officials before the concept can become a reality. One critical problem is that governments and industry do not accept First Nations as equal partners in the management of forest resources. This lack of equity has led to ineffective results with TLUOS and with the co-management idea.

One solution to the above problems may be in changing the forest tenure system for First Nations. The present tenure system favours the province and the wood products industry and obliges First Nations to operate within the confines of that system. Changing this system to give First Nations more flexibility to manage for different values and needs could alleviate a number of problems involving Aboriginal communities. It could lead to a more integrated process for managing forest resources and in the long run greater economic development for First Nation peoples.

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