

# A Guide to Conducting a Traditional Knowledge and Land Use Study



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## The Interview Process



Effective interviewing is the core of any successful traditional knowledge project.

Traditional knowledge is important, because it is greater than the experience younger generations can obtain in their lifetime. This knowledge is passed down orally from one generation to another, and can be lost once the elders pass on, although information may also be available from other sources. The relatives or friends of a knowledgeable person, or people who have worked or studied with the community, may know a particular craft, art form, or language. Some information may also be stored in a library or museum.

Other sources of knowledge can be stories or legends. A traditional story or legend that has no known original source has originated at some time in the history of the people, and provides information about their culture. These stories are usually about people, places and historical events, and may lead to sources of authentic and reliable information. Personal stories are also important.

Many elders are motivated to participate in a traditional knowledge study because the information may be used for educational purposes, especially in schools their grandchildren attend. Also, it is part of a community's culture, and the elders are the original source of that knowledge.

### Selecting Community Interviewers

One of the first and most important things to do when initiating a study is to prepare for the interviews. This will involve the selection of interviewers and compiling a list of people to be interviewed. The selection of community interviewers is critical, as these people will be interacting with community elders and other members of the study. They must be well respected and trusted by the community and have some knowledge of their community's cultural practices. It is preferable if they are able to speak the local language; otherwise, an interpreter may be necessary.

The number of interviewers will depend on the deadlines, the budget, and the



*Cynthia Pyc (Arctic Institute of North America) interviewing elder Bill Willier from Swan River First Nation.*

number of people to be interviewed. It is also a good idea to have one or two additional people available who can take over if another person leaves the project. These people can be trained along with the other interviewers.

### Who Should be Interviewed?

Everyone in the community has some traditional knowledge, but more can be obtained from the oldest members, who have practised and lived this knowledge. It is important to interview these people first, in case they pass away before the project is completed. There may also be people in the community who are not elderly, but have special knowledge or experience about certain traditional activities. The budget constraints will also determine the number of interviews. The list can be reviewed to see if there are people who could be interviewed later, if more funds become available.

The project's successful completion is possible only with the participation of the knowledgeable people of the community. Sometimes there will be reluctance or refusal to do the interviews.

If a person is reluctant to participate, they usually have a reason. Some people will recall the days when they were told that aboriginal knowledge was without value, and many of the oldest people will remember being ignored. Some feel traditional information is very secret and not to be told to outsiders, while others may have been studied before and have seen no benefit from it. Political alliances and family relationships can also influence peoples' attitudes about being interviewed.

People are more willing to participate when they know their information is important and that their participation is valued. Consequently, those people identified as valuable to the study may need to be encouraged to take part in the interview process. It is critical that these members are well informed about the study and its short- and long-term benefits. This is the task of the community leaders, the coordinator, and the interviewers. They should also be acknowledged and respected for their knowledge and the contribution it will make to their community for the future.

You may need to locate and interview people now living outside the study area. These people may have been former residents or may live in another community that traditionally used part of the study area.

### Supplies

Interviewing supplies include a tape recorder and microphone, tape cassettes, camera, film (slide or print), spare batteries, writing equipment, and large-scale maps showing the traditional territory. If available, and the interview subject agrees, a video camera can be used to record the interview. A cloth bag or briefcase can be purchased to keep most of the supplies together.

## Setting up the Interviews

Once there are enough funds to proceed with the interviews, and the elders have been selected, the interview process can begin. The interviewers should meet to review the list of people to be interviewed, and decide who would be the best to interview each person. In some cases, a woman may interview another woman, and in other cases, family members may want to interview their own relatives.

When doing the first interview, the interviewer will arrange to meet in a comfortable place, often at the elder's home. It must also be at a time that is convenient for the person being interviewed. Most interviews take approximately two to three hours. Any longer, and the person becomes tired. People are usually interviewed two, three, or four times, depending on the amount of information they have.

### How to Interview

Before the interview process begins, the interviewers must be trained. A consultant is usually brought in who has knowledge and experience. The interviewers are paid to attend a two-day (12-hour) workshop that includes learning interview skills, developing a list of helpful questions, mapping, and using the equipment. The interviewers are taught that the person being interviewed has a "book" of information in their head, and it is up to the interviewer to obtain as much of that information as the person being interviewed is willing to give.

When conducting an interview, the first thing an interviewer does is to make it clear to the person being interviewed why they are there. For example, the interviewer may ask: Do you know about the traditional knowledge and land use study that is being done by your community? If they answer no, then you would explain the project.

Otherwise, the interviewer would go on to explain that they wish to talk about their knowledge, how they and their family did things or lived. They would also reinforce how important this knowledge is to the community and future generations. Next, they would ask permission to write and record their information, and to mark any sites on a map. If there is a problem with one of these activities, the interviewer should try to clarify their purpose. If a person does not want to be recorded, but is willing to have their story written down, then writing will have to do. The interviewer must always have the consent of the person before they proceed.

Your trainer's suggestions will probably include:

- ◆ Stick to the subject while interviewing and help the person being interviewed to do the same.
- ◆ Ask leading questions to keep focused on the purpose of the interview. For example, if you are told about a traditional way of preparing food for winter, ask another question that brings out detail: Does your family still dry fish in the fall?

- ◆ Avoid interrupting an answer.
- ◆ Be alert to cues given from the person you are interviewing about other possible questions. Let people know about something in the discussion that needs further comment.
- ◆ Encourage a person to give an answer even though they may wonder why they are being asked about something they think the interviewer already knows. The interviewer should ask questions even though they know the answer.
- ◆ Be careful not to insult or embarrass a person by asking questions you are reasonably sure cannot be answered.
- ◆ Invite a person being interviewed to suggest where an answer to a question could be found, if they are uncertain about their answer.
- ◆ Be prepared to interview more than once, as elderly persons may become tired or restless after two or three hours.
- ◆ Use key words as aids, for example, words that describe all of the objects referred to in the map legends.
- ◆ Avoid interviewing if there are significant distractions, such as community events, family gatherings, or wakes. Be sensitive to smaller distractions such as children playing, visitors, or household chores.
- ◆ Allow a minimum of 24 hours between making and keeping an appointment.
- ◆ Up to three days is a reasonable standard.
- ◆ A desirable way to avoid being insensitive to political and social conditions is to be non-partisan and unconditionally focused on the objectives of the interview.
- ◆ The language of the land has words that are not familiar to many readers of the finished report, e.g., push-up (not an exercise), carryall (a toboggan), break-up, etc. Therefore, it will be helpful to build a glossary of local terms.
- ◆ As the project continues there should be more community awareness of what is happening. Some people will know why they are being interviewed, so they may anticipate the questions and have answers that were not thought of at the initial interview.

## Questions to Ask

During the interview, the interviewer will ask a number of questions. These questions will vary depending on the type of information the community requires to meet the purpose and objectives of the study.

### Introductory Questions

- ◆ Have you heard about the Traditional Knowledge and Land Use Study that is being done?
- ◆ If "yes," continue. If "no," explain the project.
- ◆ I (we) wish to talk to you about what you know about how you or your family did things (or lived) in the past and today. Your information is important and valuable. Do you mind giving me (us) this information?

- ◆ If “yes,” continue. If “no,” take time to explain the project, its importance and benefits to the community and encourage their participation.
- ◆ Would you be willing, after I (we) have written and recorded your information, to mark on the map the different locations of important sites, such as burial sites, cabins, trails and other things? If “no,” explain the mapping plan.
- ◆ May I (we) use a tape recorder to record what you say? May we take a picture of you? May we videotape this interview?

### Questions about Traditional Land Use

- ◆ How long have you or your parents, or grandparents, lived in the traditional area? What is your family history?
- ◆ Did you, your parents, or grandparents hunt and trap full time? Where did you trap (draw on map)? How long? Do you have a trapline now? What is the number?
- ◆ Do you know the location of any new, old, or fallen-down cabins? (Indicate on map)
- ◆ What trails do you know about? What are their names? Where are they on the map (draw in)?
- ◆ Do you know where any people are buried? (Indicate on the map) When were they buried there? How did they die?

Stuart Janvier (left) and Elmer Herman (centre) review map locations with craftsman and elder Baptiste Janvier.



- ◆ Do you know the location of any sacred areas and why they are sacred? (Put locations on the map)
- ◆ Do you know of any special meeting or celebration places that were used in the past or are used today, by your family or friends, or the community? (Indicate on map) What were these places used for (wakes, dances, etc).
- ◆ What animals, birds, fish, insects, and plants (berries, herbs, trees, or shrubs) were used for food, or other special occasions?
- ◆ Are there any special places where plants are collected for medicine, food, or other purposes? Where are they located? For example, berry patches? (Indicate on map)
- ◆ Are there special places where the community goes to fish or hunt? What season do they go?
- ◆ What animals do you or did you trap on your trapline? When and where?
- ◆ What animals do you hunt or catch for food? Where?
- ◆ What fish do you catch? Where?
- ◆ What birds do you hunt or use for special purposes? Where?
- ◆ Are there any animals, birds, fish, or insects that should be protected?
- ◆ Are there any special areas that should be protected for the animals, fish or birds?
- ◆ Will you explain how the following items were produced?
  1. food
  2. clothing
  3. bedding
  4. artworks
  5. crafts
  6. tools or utensils
  7. weapons
  8. hunting, trapping, gathering or fishing gear
  9. housing
  10. storage
  11. toys
  12. musical instruments
- ◆ Do you know any traditional or old stories or songs?

### Other Helpful Hints and Questions

These comments are intended to help the interviewer form questions that facilitate answers that enhance the retrieval of knowledge. These comments may or may not be factual as they are written, but they should help in the search for factual data. Treat this as "helpful hints" only.

#### Mammals - big game

- ◆ Moose and deer will forage new-growth forest in preference to mature old-growth forest.
- ◆ Moose will forage shallow water lakeshore reeds.
- ◆ Moose and deer are not usually found in open large-range muskeg habitat.
- ◆ The woodland caribou may be forced out of its habitat range by fire.
- ◆ Big game (by species) range in townships \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_ and ranges \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_?
- ◆ Recreational seasonal hunting, predator kill, and vehicle road-kill may threaten a sustainable population.
- ◆ Does increased access to the bush-land place negative pressure on the animal population?
- ◆ Is there a caribou species that is unique to the mountains?
- ◆ How soon after a forest fire will animals return?



#### Mammals - fur bearers

- ◆ The fox is known to be in the general area along the \_\_\_\_\_ River.
- ◆ Although not plentiful, some animals are seen throughout the whole region.
- ◆ Animals that are rarely seen, and then only in specific areas, are \_\_\_\_\_.
- ◆ Wolverine were seen in the 19\_\_s. Have any signs been seen since?
- ◆ Have skunk been seen in recent years?
- ◆ Grizzly bear habitat is known to be in special areas only.
- ◆ Which fur bearing animals are not known to be in the project area?

### Fish

- ◆ There is "better fishing" in some places than there is in others; where?
- ◆ Native food fishing is limited by the amount needed. Is there waste?
- ◆ It is a traditional custom to give fish to elders who are no longer able to fish for themselves.
- ◆ Dried fish is a delicacy, and is a respectful gift.
- ◆ Commercial fishing by "outsiders" and sport fishing has a much greater impact on the fish stocks these days than does traditional fishing.
- ◆ Pike, walleye, whitefish are in all lakes and major rivers.
- ◆ Most fish species are found in rivers, but their primary habitat is lakes.
- ◆ Brook trout and grayling are stream fish.
- ◆ Suckers and chubs are the smallest of the fish species and are hunted along shorelines of streams, rivers and lakes.
- ◆ The burbot, also known as fresh water cod, is found in the area. It is not popular as a food fish.
- ◆ The sturgeon is or is not plentiful in this region.
- ◆ When every household had a dog team, fish of any kind was often the only available dog food and was caught and preserved (dried) in large quantities.

### Birds

- ◆ This study is limited to the birds most commonly used. The most important of these are the grouse, ducks, and geese.
- ◆ All birds are a potential source of human food.
- ◆ Waterfowl are a source of meat, down and feathers for quilting, waterproof bags (skin of waterfowl), pouches (head of pelican), ornaments (beaks and nails and feathers), bait to catch fur-bearing animals.
- ◆ Birds compete with humans for the animal, fish and vegetation food supply of the region.
- ◆ Birds supply eggs for cooking and eating.
- ◆ Birds that migrate from the north to this region are ptarmigan, snow bunting and arctic owls and ravens.



- ◆ Three species of grouse (sharp-tailed grouse, ruffed grouse and spruce grouse) are common to the area year-round, and are an important food supply. The willow ptarmigan joins these three in the winter months. The blue (mountain) grouse is in the mountain range.
- ◆ Is the blue grouse in the region of the current study?

### **Berries, herbs and other plants**

- ◆ Is there a special place for gathering plants for medical remedies?
- ◆ Is it possible that a plant habitat is rare and is known only within a definite locality?
- ◆ Some herbs and plants are used for a sweat lodge ceremony.
- ◆ The use of plants and herbs for medical remedy is being replaced by prescribed drugs.
- ◆ It is possible that prescribed drugs could be produced from aboriginal knowledge.
- ◆ What herbs are a food or food supplement?
- ◆ How many fruit bearing plants were there? How were they used?
- ◆ Bearberry is plentiful. Its leaves, turned reddish-orange when ripe, were a traditional source of kinnikinnick (tobacco). Kinnikinnick also comes from other sources—the red willow bark, for example.
- ◆ Berries are plentiful in sparsely located patches.
- ◆ Productive areas do not repeat year after year. They may skip a year or two of producing fruit.
- ◆ Rose hip (Albera rose) and raspberry are found in disturbed land, e.g., roadways.
- ◆ The dewberry, in the raspberry family, is indigenous to the boreal forest.
- ◆ Strawberry is found in open areas and is the first berry to ripen (late June).
- ◆ Black currant, red currant, and gooseberry are rare and may be found on ground that has been disturbed by equipment or fire.
- ◆ Traditional use of berries included food, dye, berry juice, beads.
- ◆ Berry production is guided by growing conditions. Blueberry plants, for example, although plentiful in an area in one year, may not bear fruit in a following year.
- ◆ Blueberry and bog cranberry are often found together on sandy and shallow bog-covered ground.

### **Trees and shrubs**

- ◆ How were trees and shrubs traditionally used?
- ◆ Trees and shrubs provided fuel, food, medicine, building supplies, shelter, instruments, tools, and art and craft supplies.
- ◆ Generally, trees and shrubs provided the sustenance for all living creatures.
- ◆ Jack pine or spruce is the favourite wood for cooking and heating, but all wood may be used for that purpose.
- ◆ Spruce is the preferred tree for constructing log homes and other buildings.
- ◆ Birch and larch are hardwoods and preferred for the construction of toboggans and snowshoe frames.
- ◆ Birch bark is extensively used in the making of household crafts, ornaments, shingles, and canoe covers.
- ◆ Birch trees are tapped for sap that is rendered to syrup.
- ◆ There may be groves of birch trees with sap-collecting incisions.
- ◆ Tamarack (larch), known to bush people as Indian hardwood, is used to make toboggan runners and snowshoe frames.
- ◆ Willow branches are used for the main frame of a sweat lodge.
- ◆ Willow root is the preferred tinder to smoke-cure meat and fish.
- ◆ Willow branches are used to make baskets and other crafts.
- ◆ Spruce gum (sap) is glue, and it is medicine.
- ◆ Spruce root is rope.

### **Homes, cabins, land sites and traditional place names**

- ◆ Lakes and rivers had aboriginal language names, usually named after a bird, fish, animal or a feature of the lake, e.g., Island Lake, Long Lake, Trout Lake. In some cases, the English language name is a literal translation.
- ◆ Non-aboriginal people have renamed some aboriginal places to honour non-aboriginal people.
- ◆ Were traditional place names named after the original people?
- ◆ Newcomers were inclined to honour themselves or someone they knew by naming a place by the name of that person.

*Alphonse Beaver, lived most of his life in this log home he built himself. In this 1995 photograph, he was 96 and still independent.*



- ◆ Are aboriginal sites accessible?
- ◆ Is current owner permission required?
- ◆ Date and mark the location of the oldest known cabin site.
- ◆ Name the place of multiple cabin sites and single cabin sites.  
Was this a permanent community or was it a seasonal camp?
- ◆ New cabin – was it made by an aboriginal person or was it made by a non-aboriginal person?
- ◆ Which cabins are still used?
- ◆ Are there traces remaining of equipment, tools, canoes, and toboggans?
- ◆ In what state of decomposition is a cabin - only an outline or partial structure?
- ◆ Does a sod mound remain that was once banked around a building?
- ◆ Some sites may be 19th-century trading posts, owned independently.
- ◆ Most home base cabin sites are on the shoreline of a lake or major river transportation route.
- ◆ Overnight cabin sites are usually on overland transportation routes, possibly along a small tributary stream, and they may also be stopover cabins between communities on a main transportation route.

- ◆ Every major lake in the region may have at least one community site; some have three or four.
- ◆ Most lakes and major river systems will be connected with an overland trail, used by anyone, mainly in the freeze-over season.
- ◆ Traditional trap line cabin sites may have several trapping and hunting trails in all directions, many used solely by the trapper in that area.
- ◆ Trace remains of a "burial" cabin may be a cabin in which human bodies were placed—a form of burial not practised since about 1920.
- ◆ Some cabins may have been left unoccupied because of an unexplained death within the cabin, e.g., an unknown illness causing death.
- ◆ Trappers and hunters traditionally stored hunting gear in their cabins and hunting equipment and tools in the bush—hanging from trees.
- ◆ All aboriginal products were biodegradable. There was no garbage.
- ◆ Evidence of human habitation may include products that would degrade over centuries, e.g., stone tools, stone structures, stone ovens, or stone fish traps.

### **Trails, burial sites and sacred sites**

- ◆ There may be many unregistered burial sites throughout the territory.
- ◆ Most burials since the 1940s are in large community cemeteries.
- ◆ Burial may have been in the trapping and hunting communities, in quasi-organized plots.
- ◆ Burial sites are often on a high sandy knoll where markings are preserved.
- ◆ Around the turn of the 20th century, burials may have been along trap line and hunting routes.
- ◆ The oldest burial markings will be a hollow in the ground, a natural stone marker, a log, or board marker.
- ◆ Trees, shrub and grass may cover some burial plots.
- ◆ There are cemeteries and some single burial sites that are fenced with vertically standing boards, apparently influenced by practices introduced by foreign people in the 18th and 19th centuries.
- ◆ Some graves will contain more than one person.
- ◆ Registered cemetery sites in today's communities may not need to be mapped, but they could be recorded by place and number of plots.

- ◆ Many of the current elders will not be buried in the community of their birth.
- ◆ Traditional wakes are still practised.
- ◆ Sacred sites may include remnants of sweat lodges. They may be once again used as a place of spiritual comfort, or for personal and social healing.
- ◆ Some of the oldest people know where their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents were buried.
- ◆ Burial practices may have been to leave a body in a secluded spot near a tree, or place the body on a platform that was hung from a tree, or leave a body in an abandoned cabin, and then let nature take its course.
- ◆ During an influenza epidemic in 1919 there were mass burials.
- ◆ Infant mortality was high up to the mid-20th century.
- ◆ Some people were buried with personal possessions.
- ◆ Some graves have a container of kinnickinnick in the peak or the grave cover. This is an offering-to-the-dead given by family at the time of burial.
- ◆ Seismic work and construction may have interfered with graves.
- ◆ Sacred sites are spiritual sites. Spiritual images may vary from one region to another (not all native cultures are alike) or there may be none.
- ◆ There are old trails that connected a trapper's own trapline sets, or connected neighbouring trap lines.
- ◆ There are main trails connecting large lakes where there were one, two, or more communities of people along the shoreline of the lakes.
- ◆ The oldest trails are foot-trails and dog team trails. Somewhat later, horses and dogs backpacked supplies and equipment over original trails.
- ◆ During the last half of the 19th century, the horse- and oxen-powered sleigh or wagon was used to haul new-age equipment, supplies and food.
- ◆ Corduroy roads are logs laid side by side transversely.
- ◆ Walking, dog team and horse trails remain indented in muskeg.
- ◆ Canopies of tall trees cover the underbrush of old trails.
- ◆ Trail meeting places may be marked by a lobsterstick.
- ◆ There is now a public highway along portions of the original walking and dog team route.

- ◆ New roads tend to go through side hills, over hills and over muskeg, while old trails followed the contour of the land, went along rivers and lakes.
- ◆ Trail crossings on small streams were bridged with logs and stones.
- ◆ Trading post sites are specifically connected by the wagon and sleigh trails.
- ◆ The longest dog team trails, connecting trading communities, are probably those used to deliver supplies.
- ◆ Seismic line and oil and gas cutlines are now a straight, clear and faster route to take to connect with trapline trails.
- ◆ These days, many people commute from a central service community to their trapping site.

### Recording the Interview

During an interview, the information is usually written in longhand, as well as recorded on cassettes or video, with the permission of the interviewee. Often the interview will be done in the first language of the person, and will have to be translated later. The interviewer will take a photograph, with the permission of the interviewee. All of these materials must be labelled and carefully stored as part of the original interview.

Afterward, the interviewer will review the tapes and their notes and make a record of the time spent on the interview. The interviewer or another person may be responsible for transcribing the interview notes and tapes.

### Rewarding Participation

Participation in the project may be reward enough for your interview subjects. Some people may be offended by an offer of cash for their knowledge, while others may expect an honorarium. A gift acknowledges a courteous relationship between the interviewer and the person being interviewed, but does not have to be tobacco.

Get advice if you are unfamiliar with the community's expectations. Certainly, cover any expenses the participants have. When these people are invited to meetings or community mapping sessions to review project information and offer constructive comments, it is courteous to provide transportation and a meal.