


Traditional Uses of Seaweed from the Mi'kmaq and Williche: A Look at Sustaining Information on the Uses of Natural Resources

Indigenous Community Development: Phase 1 –
Ethnobotany 2.7A

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Introduction

Reclaiming and protecting indigenous ecological knowledge is an important exercise to provide the basis for a community's social and economic development.

This project explored the traditional uses of seaweed by the Mi'kmaq of PEI and the Williche of Chiloé, Chile. The aims of this research were to contribute to the programs of two social economy organizations whose goals include economic diversification, and cultural survival of marginalized indigenous communities on PEI and Chile. The means are through 1) documenting community development opportunities based on cataloguing knowledge on indigenous knowledge of marine plants 2) increasing understanding between Mi'kmaq and Williche peoples, as a first stage in development of further projects.



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Background and Rationale

Aboriginal peoples are marginalized and discriminated against both in Canada and internationally. This project serves to support and extend the work of social economy organizations dedicated to the sustainability of Indigenous communities: by learning, building upon, and exploring knowledge of natural resources.

It focused on building community mobilization around *the issue of the disappearance of traditional information, and what the current sustainable practices are in regards to natural resources.*

It will also give the Mi'kmaq and Williche an opportunity to build their local capacity for natural medicine and entrepreneurship, in whatever way they deem appropriate, by tapping their wisdom.



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Community/University Collaboration (partnership)

- The partnership for this project spans locally between academic and community groups on Prince Edward Island, through a MOU signed between the Institute of Island Studies (UPEI) and the Mi'kmaq Confederacy of PEI, and internationally with groups in Chile (aboriginal, community and university) working through the Institute of Island Studies.
- All partners contributed mentorship for the field research that took place and provided funding (also in-kind) for the project.
- Knowledge mobilization within and beyond the partnership was achieved by conducting workshops in Aboriginal communities in Chile, Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick.



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Project Methodology

- A qualitative approach: primary, participatory research (including interviews and participant observation) with literature searches.
- The research took place between the fall of 2006 and the spring of 2007 involving Indigenous communities on PEI and in Chile.
- The methodology for this project also followed the ethical principals of the *social economy* and the practice of *action research*. In my opinion one focus of the social economy is to help build upon community development from a bottom-up perspective (grassroots), while being respectful of the community and the individuals involved in the research. Self-sufficiency and achievement of the better well-being of the society are overriding goals.
- Participatory Action Research involves participant groups throughout the research, with the focus on them as the beneficiaries and contributors of the research process and results.



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Main Findings To Date

With this project I have presented a look at:

- the importance of the current uses of sea plants (provides food and medicine to impoverished people; is an issue of food security),
- how this practice is disappearing (loss of land and tradition),
- and the importance of sustaining these practices.

Reclaiming and protecting indigenous ecological knowledge is an important exercise to provide the basis for a community's development. Through the utilization of natural resources and focusing on environmental stability, there is an opportunity for such development. Aboriginal people do not receive encouragement to build upon their cultural knowledge.

From this research project there could be future practices of small-scale production with natural resources (seaweed) giving the youth and wider community a form of local employment and the ability to engage in the wisdom that their elders possess.



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Deliverables (completed & planned)

Completed:

- Research report 2008;
- 4 Community Workshops (PEI, NB and Chile);
- Conference presentation (South Korea);
- Curriculum materials, Island Studies;
- Improved capacity for aboriginal community development (long term)

Planned:

- Community guide to use of seaweed for food, medicine and small business (2009);



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How Students Benefited from the Project

- The intern analysed opportunities for new options for Chiloé micro-entrepreneurs, and she fostered communications between Mi'kmaq and Williche peoples. She prepared a final report of her overseas experience.
- Skills required were qualitative research, library research, good interview skills, communicating in Spanish and ability to prepare reports.



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Conclusions and Next Steps

- Through funding I received from the Social Economy and Sustainability Network I was able to perform various dissemination workshops in aboriginal communities. These workshops are key to the research project because they allow me to bring the findings back into the community, and instill upon the participants a realistic cultural and educational experience (cooking with seaweed).
- I hope to continue this work in the Atlantic provinces I have not been able to visit (NS and NFLD).



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