

Learning from Place: A Return to Traditional Mushkegowuk Ways of Knowing

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Abstract

This paper details a research project dedicated to honouring Mushkegowuk Cree concepts of land, environment and life in Fort Albany First Nation. Community youth interviewed local Elders to produce an audio documentary about the relations of the people to their traditional territory. These interactions evolved into a 10-day river trip with youth, adult and elder participants traveling together on their traditional waters and lands learning about the meaning of paquataskamik, the Cree word used for traditional territory, all of the environment, nature, and everything it contains. Bringing generations of community members together on the land led to reclamation of culture and indigenous knowledge and built greater community resistance to external forms of economic exploitation and development.

Keywords: Learning, Cree, traditional, Indigenous, Knowledge, Fort Albany, land, place.

Précis

Cet article présente un projet de recherche dédié au respect des concepts de Mushkegowuk crie de la terre, l'environnement et la vie dans la première Nation de Fort Albany. Jeunes de la collectivité a interviewé des aînés locaux afin de produire un documentaire sonore sur les relations de la population de leur territoire traditionnel. Ces interactions est transformées en un voyage de 10 jours la rivière avec les jeunes, les participants adultes et aînés voyageant ensemble sur

leurs eaux traditionnelles et leurs terres d'en apprendre sur le sens de paquataskamik. Réunissant des générations de membres de la communauté sur le terrain ont conduit à la remise en état de la culture et les connaissances autochtones et construit une plus grande résistance de la communauté aux formes extérieures de l'exploitation économique et de développement.

Learning from Place:

A Return to Traditional Mushkegowuk Ways of Knowing

This paper will detail a research project dedicated to honouring Mushkegowuk Cree concepts of land, environment and life in Fort Albany First Nation. This project examined how the James Bay Cree perceive the land/environment and how changes to the land brought on by resource extraction affected these understandings. To ensure relevance to the community and ongoing involvement, a local advisory group was formed with the involvement of the band council and greater community so that the Cree could track environmental and social changes on their own terms for their own purposes.

A key part of this project featured a 10-day river trip with youth, adult and elder participants. As they travelled together on their traditional waters and lands, youth, elders, and the generation in-between, shared their learning about the relations of the people to the lands and the related issues of governance and land management. Bringing generations of community members together on the land advanced the community's recognition and reclamation of Mushkegowuk knowledge and culture, and in the process of these community building activities, an informed critique/resistance to externally defined forms of economic exploitation, accumulation and development.

Kellert (2005) has said that connection to nature is important to children's intellectual, emotional, social, physical and spiritual development. In the case of the Fort Albany First Nation, this connection to nature and land was all the more significant for its contributions to an additional dimension of development: the cultural identity of the people. The processes of creating an audio documentary about relations to the river and engaging in trips along the river were part of a decolonizing process of re-membling

(following Haig-Brown, 2005) as younger generations were re-introduced to traditional ways of knowing. Over just two generations, one could observe the erosion of deeper meanings of connection to land and territory that are encoded in the Mushkegowuk language, its declining use among the adult and youth generations. The research project sought to respect community concerns about the need to bring generations together to share, use and deepen this knowledge at a critical point in the people's history as external forces seek to impose a different meaning of land and its 'utility', upon the Mushkegowuk in the Treaty Nine region. For Muskegowuk, the land is relative, not merely a resource. As Haig-Brown and Hodson (2009) have written, "the land...is a complex being – a spiritual and material place from which all life springs." (p. 168). This notion is conveyed in the word *Paquataskimik* that came to be associated with many aspects of the evolving research project.

Setting the Stage for Research

Fort Albany First Nation is a small Mushkegowuk Cree community located on the west coast of James Bay, about 130 air kilometres northwest of Moosonee, Ontario. The community is situated on Sinclair and Anderson's Islands on the Albany River, and on the mainland. Alongside local researchers and advisory group, we set out to ask how the Mushkegowuk Cree community along the James Bay coast perceives land, the environment, and traditional cultural and economic practices in relation to social and economic well-being. External members of the research team had previously established relationships with the community and had been encouraged by community members to involve youth in discussions about the importance of the land and river, which ultimately led to the decision to investigate First Nations understanding of social economy.

Before developing a formal research strategy, researchers and community members discussed issues that would support the development of a framework reflective of local aspirations, including ethical protocols for research from a Mushkegowuk perspective.

Other issues for discussion included:

- Language, history, and territoriality;
- Deeply rooted relationships among people and between people and nature (such as the concept of paquataskamik, explained below);
- Ways of seeing and being in the world (including social and economic relationality) that lay outside of a western perspective;
- Efforts of local people who struggle for self-determination in a specific place (i.e. Treaty 9 area).

We then developed a set of objectives that were achievable within the project's two-year timeframe and that could respond to the different perspectives of the specific people involved in project discussions, including university researchers, community colleagues and partners including youth, adults, elders, and other local participants.

The initial research phase was centred on local advisory and community members in defining research directions. An inter-generational advisory group was formed with representative members of local community organizations (band office, health centre, education authority, the high school, elders and youth groups) from the community so that ethical issues and choices would be informed and tracked by local people themselves and the project would develop with continued community involvement. Research protocols were developed with the advisory group. It was important to the researchers to build reciprocity into the research process and to privilege Mushkegowuk social

relationality, which was becoming more visible and “nameable” through the actual activities of the project.

In the early research design stages, it was evident that a community priority was bringing together Elders and youth so they could learn from one another about the role and meaning of the land to social well-being. Since that time, the project has been about fostering development of meaningful space for inter-generational dialogue and community research on social and economic relationships rooted in Mushkegowuk conceptions of life and traditional territory. The concerns came at a time when discoveries of the Ring of Fire mineral deposits west of the community were and are bringing pressures from mining companies and the federal government to enter into large scale extractive development. Other looming development proposals in the Treaty 9 region have included hydro development projects and multiple announcements about potential roads and mining projects.

As the region became seen externally as a new frontier for extractive development, it was also a time of resurgence of Indigenous identities and cultural practices. Throughout the research, a consistent underlying theme arising surfaced as an interrogative in relation to the dialectic process underway: what is the role of land/territory, and what strategies are people developing to maintain the Mushkegowuk ‘way of life,’ particularly in face of pressures to enter into the world of large-scale extractive capitalism? We were essentially seeking to identify routes towards “decolonization”, towards shaping adequately responses to problems arising in the face of externally driven development and its implications for life and land in Mushkegowuk territory.

First Relationships to Land

Gruenewald (2003), paraphrasing Bowers (2001), says decolonization as an act of resistance must not be limited to rejecting and transforming dominant ideas; it also depends on recovering and renewing traditional, non-commodified cultural patterns such as mentoring and intergenerational relationships. A critical pedagogy of place aims to (a) identify, recover, and create material spaces and places that teach us how to live well in our total environments (reinhabitation); and (b) identify and change ways of thinking that injure and exploit other people and places (decolonization). (p. 9) In other words, reinhabitation and decolonization depend on each other.

The advisory committee for the project wanted to develop a process that brought youth and elders together. We thus established a process with the participating community groups to promote youth, adult, and elder involvement with an audio documentary project about social, cultural and economic perspectives of the Kistachowan (Albany) River. The community chose the river as a theme because of its cultural and historical importance. To support local Cree youth, skill-building workshops were organized in which youth participants made their own audio documentaries based on the interviews they carried out with community members. They received training in research skills, and recorded their intergenerational learning through radio documentaries and ‘zines’ (pronounced “zeen”, short for magazine, an informal publication produced outside of the magazine industry). The audio media and ‘zines’ were chosen as a way to communicate the messages to the wider community about the experiences and perspectives of youth, adults and elders, about the river. The point of the interviews was to encourage intergenerational relationships and catalyze knowledge transfer from elder generations to youth. The interviews were not “data” but ways of bringing together

community, of fostering dialogue and generating spaces for socializing conceptualizations of the territory from a Mushkegowuk perspective.

Youth conducted interviews with peers, adults, and elders on key issues related to the role of land, the river, and the people for community social and economic well-being. Fifteen interviews were collected and formed the basis for a short audio documentary, titled *The Kistachowan River Knows My Name*, which aired in the local community and on Wawatay radio, which reaches a wide audience in northern Ontario. The traditional knowledge and teachings that were shared, and commitments by youth to learn more, were particularly powerful and they could be shared more broadly with the community and beyond, via radio.

In the development of the radio documentary, the significance of the river and knowledge of the social, cultural, economic, and spiritual meanings of the river among community members became heightened. From the experience of creating the audio documentary and its airing on the radio, the idea of organizing an excursion on the river was the next progression. During the first excursion in 2009, Elders would share knowledge with youth about ways to live off the river and lands and note key sites along the way. As part of the project, youth and Elders travelled together on the traditional waters and lands, exploring history, language, issues of governance, and land management. The excursion into traditional territory itself offered a wealth of insight into the importance of land for social and economic well-being among people in the remote First Nation. The group documented sites of significance to the community, experienced routes that hold great historical significance, and brought people together in the sharing of knowledge. Audio visual (radio, photo and film) and written materials were produced that were gathered as part of a growing body of work valuing traditional territory,

including the importance of history and current usage of the territory by Fort Albany First Nation, and for visioning for the future. The excursion brought out how important water is to Mushkegowuk culture. As one participant explained:

When we hear frogs singing we know the water quality is safe for our consumption. We listen to the song of the birds to know what kind of weather is approaching. The moose will know when we need food and allow themselves to be taken. Such is the contract we have with the animal world. (Elder and community member, Fort Albany First Nation)

It is this kind of knowledge that the project sought to facilitate while contributing to reestablishing among the youth a sense of connection to land, culture and life.

Renaming and Reclaiming: Community Mapping

This community-based research project contributed to a community mapping of key cultural and historical sites akin to Linda Smith's (1999) decolonizing projects of renaming and reclaiming. Names for places in the Inninowuk language were marked as an effort to bring the original names and Cree concepts to more common use among the youth. During the river excursion the Cree-language terminology was expanded for those participating. The words paquataskamik and Kistachowan Sipi (Albany River's original name) were written along the fifty-foot long sides of the raft. There were Mushkegowuk words that were accompanied by stories for many sites along the route which were documented during the trip. Many more place names existed than the English ones that appeared on printed maps. This supported the elders' suggestion that 'every curve in the river has a name.' (Paquataskimik Project, 2012)

The ongoing drive to orient the project to Mushkegowuk ways of knowing resulted in exploring Cree words and concepts and inserting them into key project activities and documents. The main word that arose as discussions evolved about land, the river, and life in their territory was paquataskamik, ‘an Inninowuk (Cree) word that describes the ‘natural environment’ and draws attention to the whole of traditional territory.’ (Gruner and Metatawabin, 2009) As adults involved in the project described, paquataskamik is significant partly because it references a historical relationship to land which encompassed a much larger area than the reserve or family camps. This territory has been regulated, divided, and parceled by non-Inninowuk into Crown land, treaty, and reserve spaces, which has resulted in fractures and alterations to that relationship. The resulting effects of this for social networks, economic development, and survival are felt daily. When youth lose a sense of what paquataskamik is, they may begin to lose the connections that form the complex set of relations that bind them together in a historically and geographically informed identity. The focus on the word is an explicit attempt to retain a relationship to the rivers, the lands, and the communities joined together by them.

Paquataskamik: Language, Land, and Identity

According to one Mushkegowuk interviewee, paquataskamik is the Cree word used for traditional territory, all of the environment, nature, and everything it contains. Noscheemik is the word for ‘camp,’ the bush, or a more specific area within paquataskamik. For project participants, it was important to remember words like paquataskamik because they spoke to the broader project of territoriality and self-determination within Mushkegowuk lands, the ability of the Mushkegowuk people to

define development on their own terms, and to continue to build on a historical identity in a vast area that was never 'given up' to European settlers. Historically and currently, people have derived sustenance from the land, are guided by seasons and traditional hunting routes, and consider the land as crucial to healing the Mushkegowuk people from the impacts of colonialism.

The elders and other community members were concerned that the word *paquataskamik* was falling into disuse among the younger generations, who tend to use *noscheemik* instead, which pointed to a loss of important linguistic distinctions related to concepts of territoriality. One interviewee said:

So you use *paquataskamik* if you are fluent (in Cree) and if you are a young kid you use *noscheemik* ... they confuse, they're not saying it properly. That's too high a word for them so they just use the simple word, *noscheemik*. (Community member, Fort Albany First Nation)

This change in word usage was attributed by interviewed community members partly to intergenerational language loss. Residential schooling and its impact on indigenous language use drastically reduced the number of fluent speakers in the community according to some interviewed. Some community members worry that the decreasing use of words like *paquataskamik* means that the ability to form a linguistic connection to traditional territory could be at risk within a short period of time. The implications for governance, land use, economic development, and social relationships are vast.

Paquataskamik speaks to a way of relating to land based on laws and governance arrangements that were in place long before European settlers arrived. According to

Mushkegowuk, the organization of travel routes, negotiation of temporary settlements and gathering places, and planning based on availability of food sources and seasonal changes were all rooted in land-based knowledge that shaped governing practices and laws. While these laws still exist, they have been made less visible since the onset of colonialism and capitalism. Large-scale extractive capitalism, in particular, has presented new problems and perceived threats to the environment. In order to protect land and the relationships to land that are integral to Inninowuk identity, territorial self-governance is a necessity. Paquataskamik fosters a connection to land and community beyond the reserve boundaries, encouraging Inninowuk ways of relating to land that are put ahead of an accumulative or extractive economy.

The Kistachowan River is a main artery for Peetabeck, or Fort Albany First Nation (FAFN). According to one member of FAFN interviewed by a community youth, the river is particularly important concept:

It's very important to me as well, because I use the river for fishing, hunting, camping, being raised on it from a very early age ... it's also very beautiful, it's pristine, and of course, it being a river, it also carries water that's important for human life; it carries water, and it's clean ... At the same time it's a very powerful river. Every spring, when you have the spring breakup, it's quite a mighty river; I have quite a lot of respect for it. Basically, I just love the river myself. I'm on it a lot, almost every day. And just to even look at it is satisfying. (Male FAFN member interviewed by a community youth)

For the Mushkegowuk, the river is a way of life: one that has existed for thousands of years. As such, the river has many significant uses and meanings, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. The quotation below describes how points along the river where family are buried demonstrate the profound connection of ancestors, land, river, and Paquataskamik:

And my sister's there. My young sister is there; the third born in the family. She died when she was an infant. For him (father), the memory was so fresh, that every time he goes close to the cemetery, cleaning up the grass or fixing the fence, just doing anything to improve, then he'd finish all that and then he'd say a little prayer and cry. That was just how fresh it is. And I saw him do that until way afterwards; the last time we took him out there, and it was the very same thing. So for him the river is his daughter, lying a hundred miles up; his brother who is buried twenty miles downstream from that; his mother who's buried, probably 120 further than that ... And his grandfather is buried about 135 miles from the north side of the river ... along the river. So, it's family, it's a family cemetery, it's a highway... there are markers along the highway to indicate significant events, significant moments; people that have passed away that are close to you and they are lying along the river. So it's a river of life; it's growth. (FAFN adult, interviewed by FAFN youth)

In this case, the part of paquataskamik that relates to the river demonstrates the profound set of personal historical relationships with the river that connects the community to the

land and to each other.

The Kistachowan River was a site for discussing how Mushkegowuk self-organized in the territory, binding diverse communities through sites of social, cultural and economic activity. Through the project, participants learned that prior to contact there was a community along each tributary. There was a pathway connecting each community to the next one. One important purpose of this pathway was for the use of runners who brought news to a neighboring community. News could travel instantly with runners taking news to the next as soon as they received it. It was the river that bound people and communities together. One such name is Nameo Sipi which now is a cultural camp area for Kashechewan and Fort Albany. It is an old trading post, a place where sturgeon are to be found and an old village site. Old trails still intersect at that site.

The river trip helped members of the community share linguistic, cultural, historical, and geographical knowledge. It re-established respect for the meaning of paquataskamik and demonstrated how irreconcilable that meaning is with western notions of boundaries as imposed by federal and provincial reserve policy and other planning models. This points to the broad political efforts for the recognition of land and water rights that are currently underway. For the people of the community, these lands are a part of the cultural inheritance of Mushkegowuk, one that they feel their children and grandchildren should be able to inherit and experience. The project helped to stoke dialogues and partnerships, some pre-existing, and some catalysed by the research project itself, about the place of the river, the land, the language, and self-determination in relation to both the community of Fort Albany and to the Mushkegowuk more broadly throughout the region.

Also significant to this project was the process of deepening the relationships

among community members and to the land (Cajete, 1994). These activities, organized as they were through partnerships of small enterprises, government agencies, social economic organizations, and university bodies, still relied ultimately on the activation of friendship, kinship relations and Indigenous knowledge, originating from connection to land.

For several youth and adults participating in the river trip, arrangements were made to provide course credit for their immersion into the learning experience at the high school and university levels. Learning from land and place beyond institutional walls is a return to traditional Mushkegowuk modes of teaching and learning. While participating youth were age of majority, it might be possible with parental and community consent to replicate such an excursion with school-age students. The support of community members, Elders and a budget for supplies would be required to implement such learning in more formal schooling environments.

Conclusion

Bringing generations together to talk about the issues of land and water rights provided many learning opportunities for the community. On the subject of learning and intergenerational relationships, one interviewee said:

And I like this one (audio project), because at least you get to sit for one time in your lives, and somebody's going to show an interest in their stories, in their lives. They were just waiting for you to visit. Just waiting for young people to visit, because they have stories, they will remember good times, bad times, and dangerous times. (Community member

interviewed by FAFN youth)

The project committee and initial effort was developed well beyond the social economy project, and the community worked with diverse groups and researchers, including the NORDIK Institute of Algoma University to develop an historical timeline, an inventory of strengths, and an ethnographic snapshot of key land issues, growing in part out of the initial audio documentary project. These smaller projects became part of a broader effort to engage the community in a discussion about what activities can and should take place on traditional territory and how decisions about those activities should be made. In such discussions issues in the framing of decision-making about territory and development was made more explicit. Dominant western frames that centre on an accumulation-oriented model of development were often seen at odds with Aboriginal ways of existence in cultural and geographic regions where land informs social and economic practices.

Learning from place has concrete and meaningful community-building consequences, as Gruner (2012) articulates:

...youth who interview peers and elders such that new stories are told and recorded, later to be transcribed, and otherwise unexpressed enthusiasm for the beauty of the land is uttered out loud; English language topographical maps are scribbled over in Cree syllabics, and people gather in community halls to celebrate the sending off or coming home of people from camps and field excursions. It is this learning that was taking place out in the territory, the learning and teaching of history by community members, the assertion of legitimate presence in the area. (p. 251)

By supporting and creating a space for dialogue and learning between Cree youth and elders, this project helped strengthen the bond the Mushkegowuk people have with the river, the land and themselves. In the words of one project advisory member “I want my kids and grandchildren to know the rivers, so they know who they are and are proud of who they are, and where they come from” (Interview with female adult from Fort Albany First Nation, 2008). (Gruner, 2012, p. 224)

The survival and health of Aboriginal communities are underpinned by direct relationships to land, a strong sense of community, and the drive to be self-determining people in all areas of life (including governance, education, health and others). The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples’ Report (RCAP) and a plethora of other writing led by Aboriginal people underscore the fact that the viability of First Nation communities in Canada is dependent on a continued cultural and spiritual practice linked to land rights and political autonomy (Alfred; Battiste; RCAP). By supporting and creating a space for dialogue and learning between Cree youth and Elders, this project fostered learning about strengths binding social and economic well-being to land and environment and social and family ties and their rootedness in land. We understand that it is the bond among people in community that has made survival possible from time immemorial. Strengthening this bond will ensure the Mushkegowuk people and culture thrive for the many generations to come.

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