

Community Forestry Research Fellowship Program
Final Report for Pre-dissertation Fellowship

The Role of the Akwesasne/St. Regis Mohawk as Stakeholders in Watershed Management

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Research Goals and Objectives:

I have found through both personal experience and environmental literature review that the most effective way to look at issues and develop management plans at a watershed scale is through collaborative effort. Collaborative and community-based management has been used at many levels for at least the last 25 years. On occasion, and for various reasons, it has met with limited success, particularly when there are cultural differences among the stakeholder groups, and in many cases the process has been criticized and/or abandoned (Cooke & Kaothari 2001, Chapin 2004). One reason for the failure of the plans is that resource agencies have attempted to adapt methods used by voluntary, rural partnerships in small drainages. The application of such a method to larger, more diverse drainages has proven to be problematic (O'Neill 2005).

The challenges associated with working with people from a different cultural background derive from the lack of understanding of these different, often indigenous, groups. The processes involved in "understanding" the beliefs and positions of these groups are complicated. There is a growing body of literature, particularly in the social sciences, addressing this issue. More recently, the research procedures and literature are being driven by these groups themselves, either through action at the local level or by indigenous scholars. It is also common that indigenous people have been historically marginalized. Persecution and racism, vestiges of the colonial process lead to a lack of empowerment and social capital. The change in gender roles has also had an impact on both culture and interaction with the environment.

One goal of my research is to determine which characteristics of tribal communities influence their capability to be effective partners in watershed management groups in order to bring people of different cultures to the table and to find ways to promote inter-cultural understanding in relationship to environmental issues. Another goal is to establish a criterion to use in assessing the likelihood of success or failure in collaborative efforts involving people of another culture. The overarching goal is to provide the Mohawk Nation of Akwesasne with tools and information necessary to help achieve the environmental restoration of the reservation, a sustainable energy source, and to successfully collaborate with other entities.

Field Work and Data Collection:

My research proposal was/is based on the needs of the tribe and with the idea that the information would add to the body of academic knowledge necessary for my Ph.D. I hope to answer several questions during the interview process:

- 1: What is the level of environmental awareness on the reservation?
- 2: Who is most likely to be aware of the environment on the reservation; men or women?
- 3: What is the relationship between the tribal people and the environment, past and present, including cultural, religious, and gender factors.
- 4: What is the current attitude toward cooperation/collaboration?
- 5: What collaboration is happening now and how do the people feel about it?
- 6: What is the relationship, politically and socially, between the tribe and its neighbors?

I planned on using Ortho-Quad photos and maps based on my previous research into the spread of the invasive species *Phragmites australis* to stimulate dialogue with the interviewees in an open and non-threatening manner. The locations of stands of the invasive would be highlighted on the media. The invasive form of this plant came into the area through the St. Lawrence Seaway and has spread throughout the river drainages running from the Adirondack Mountains of Upstate New York through or adjacent to the reservation. Most people are aware of the plant and the problems associated with it. My ecological study of *P. australis* in the Akwesasne area has given me a solid understanding of the ecology of the area and has allowed me to interact with many of

the stakeholders in the region. The maps and photos show a common interest and history for the various stakeholders. The use of maps and photos has been used for several decades by sociologists and human ecologists (Freeman 1976, Berger 1977, Brody 1988) and more recently in various forms by natural resource researchers (Kassam 2000, Mohammed and Ventura 2000, Brown 2005).

I also planned to use snowball sampling, standard interview procedures and mixed methodology analysis (Heckathorn 1997, Tashakkori 1998 and 2003). The sampling is to include people varying in age, role in the tribe and gender. I have about 20 people who have agreed to be interviewed. Using the snowball method I wanted to interview until I reach at least 30 respondents. All interviews were to be oral and digitally recorded. And although there were definite questions that I hoped to answer in the interview process, I planned not to ask specific questions. Each interview would develop in its own time and form. This is critically important to the success of the project. The recent literature on the cross-cultural research process has evolved with input from both indigenous people in academia and other indigenous groups. Gibbs (2000) defines cross-cultural as describing “the space (both metaphorical and material) where cultures meet and interact...” Therefore, cross-cultural research takes place across or between cultures. It includes study conducted by non-indigenous researchers with indigenous peoples or indigenous people within academia, or other non-indigenous frameworks, working with their own or other indigenous people (Gibbs 2000). This interview method also follows precepts set forth by Smith (1999). The Mohawk people being interviewed have more power over the interview process, part of the decolonizing effort.

I decided to spend my first year on this project further developing the interview procedure. I started by finding some of the Ortho-Quad photos and maps to use and determining how far beyond the reservation boundaries to show. I also dug a little deeper into the literature on interview and analysis procedures. Although I have spent years learning the history and culture of the area and its people through family, friends, and reading, I spent countless hours with my friends in the tribe, who live both on and off the reservation, discussing these things. We also talked at length about environmental issues. Since it is also important to consider the stakeholders living outside of the reservation who would be potential collaborative partners I looked at the possibilities. Through connections in the Adirondack Park Agency (APA), the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), and Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) I was able to compile a list of potential partners. I visited with several of them and established electronic communication with several more.

During the course of this past year, several things have occurred that have altered the research plan, the focus of the project and my role in it. During the summer, my main collaborator, who was the wetlands biologist for the tribe, left her job to attend school at Virginia Tech to pursue her Ph.D. Our ecological studies in the wetlands came to a halt. I continued working with my other partners in developing the interview format and conducted three interviews.

I also spent quite a bit of time in the development of the Transboundary Indigenous Water Program (TWIP) here at Cornell. The purpose of TWIP is to work on issues within the Great Lakes/ St. Lawrence River Basin (GLSLRB) affecting the Native people in both the United States and Canada. The program is a collaborative effort with the American Indian Program (AIP), the Water Resources Institute (WRI), The Cornell Law School, and tribes and Native representatives throughout the GLSLRB. Our initial conference, “Native Water Law and Public Policy: Critical Issues in the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Watersheds”, was held in mid-November and attended by over 200 people. I was able to spend a lot of time in the course of the conference talking to not only the Mohawks in attendance, but also members of the other tribes of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, or Six Nations. The entire conference, including individual interviews, was recorded along with releases from everyone, a goldmine of data

While talking to Henry Lickers, the Environmental Director for the Mohawk Council of Akwesasne, he told me of the beginnings of a reforestation plan that they had been working on and asked me to be part of the planning.

Upon hearing the scope of the plan, I jumped at the chance. The plan calls for restoring the Carolinian forest and the wetlands on the reservation. It is to be a fully functional restoration with the people and agriculture imbedded into the landscape. Traditional people have long held, and recent academic research has concurred, that a close tie with nature is important to the physical and mental well-being of humans. This project will also create job opportunities on the reservation. We will be joining the best of western science and traditional ecological knowledge in the process. The project will follow the ideals laid out in the Great Law of Peace and will take about 150 years to fruition, the Seventh Generation. It will take partnerships and collaboration with neighbors from near and far. We have started a series of meetings to flesh out the original direction of the process and to coordinate funding efforts.

This new focus adds a couple of questions to look at in the interviews. It will be important to find out how the people perceive this project and also to tease out bits of traditional knowledge that will arise through the narrative. While this information may not go into my dissertation, it will be valuable to the planning process. Some of this has been gathered already in a community meeting.

While the overall interview strategy won't change to any large degree, I will be looking at adding focus groups and/or the community meetings to gather data. I have also chosen to do no quantitative analysis of the information. Numbers will not give us the information we need to bring the project to fruition. It is far more important to hear what the people are saying and what the range of thought is. This type of research and evaluation is far closer to the consensus process called for in the Great Law of Peace than the quantitative measures could ever be. This process gives power to the people of the Mohawk Nation by being more aligned with their traditional belief system. I will record conversations and use direct quotes to show the depth and strength of feelings and opinions. Using this interview method may complicate the analysis to a degree because it will take more effort to sift through the data to find the relevant information. It will also entail more reliance on the digital recordings over the transcripts to listen for inflections of voice. I will use the computer program Atlas-ti as an aid in the initial evaluation. All human subjects' research will be done in accordance with federal and university guidelines as well as the protocol established by the Akwesasne Task Force for the Environment.

As I have moved forward with this research, it has only strengthened my personal belief that academic research must be valuable to the community, not just to build some sort of "knowledge base." Participatory Action Research (PAR) has been an ideal match to my own beliefs and tendencies. It falls in with the basic tenets set forth by McTaggart (1989), and Petras and Porpora (1993) among others. I have also been digging into the work of indigenous and minority scholars. I have long respected the work of the late Vine Deloria. More recent entries into the field such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999), Taiaiake Alfred's *Peace, Power and Righteousness* (1999), and *Indigenizing the Academy* (Mihesuah and Wilson 2004) have given this type of work a theoretical backdrop. These books from Native American authors are also valuable to anyone working in the field of PAR.

The first year of my research has indicated that in spite of some misunderstanding and mistrust between the Mohawk and their neighbors, the people are willing to work together to restore the environment and improve the health and livelihoods of all. The traditional belief of mutual cooperation and respect, as symbolized in the Two-Row Wampum Belt, is still alive among the people. It is my hope that my work will enhance understanding and aid in building true partnerships.

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