

Coping with Change – Family Camp at Shoal Lake Cree Nation

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Abstract

With the wide range of socio-economic-environmental impacts climate change will bring, community adaptation is essential. Many communities already employ strategies to manage the impacts of change. The importance of including local perspectives in the design and implementation of adaptation measures is becoming widely recognized (Tschakert 2007, Paavola and Adger 2006). This paper examines one such strategy, Family Camp at the Shoal Lake Cree Nation, and identifies ways that this strategy increases the community's capacity to cope with change.

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Introduction

In recent history, the people of Shoal Lake Cree Nation (Shoal Lake I.R. 28, SK) have been bombarded by changing political, cultural, climatic and environmental conditions (Ermine *et al.* 2005, 2007, 2008, Pittman 2008). Community members are primarily Swampy Cree and traditionally relied on hunting and gathering for subsistence. The in-migration of European settlers onto the Canadian Plains and the displacement of First Nations populations onto reserves brought new ways of life to these families. They were forced to give up their nomadic lifestyle and become sedentary, leaving the forest for the town. After *ê-mâyahkamikahk* (translated as: ‘where it all went wrong’), also known as the Northwest Resistance of 1885, Cree First Nations were exiled spatially, politically, and culturally (McLeod 2007) by the implementation of strict assimilation policy imposed by the Canadian Government, including requirements to attend residential schools. Simultaneously, First Nations coped with the great droughts of the 1850s and 1930s, further straining traditional and agricultural lifestyles. The compounding effects of these changes have left First Nations in a vulnerable state (Ermine *et al.* 2008, Pittman 2008). In addition, Shoal Lake Cree Nation, along with the rest of the world, faces climate change.

Vulnerabilities to present and future climate change often manifest from social conditions that serve to increase exposure and reduce adaptive capacity to climate-related risk (Ford & Smit 2004, Kasperson & Kasperson 2001, Smit & Pilofosova 2001, Cannon *et al.* 2003). Climate-related vulnerabilities are often compounded by the presence of other stressors (Belliveau *et al.* 2006). To develop a better understanding of these vulnerabilities, community vulnerability assessments of Shoal Lake Cree Nation and James Smith First Nation were conducted by the lead author.

The importance of community participation and the inclusion of local perspectives in community vulnerability assessments and in designing and implementing adaptive efforts are widely recognized (Tschakert 2007, Paavola and Adger 2006). Fostering trusting and reciprocal relationships with community members was an integral part of this community vulnerability study, and community members were consulted and played an active role in the thesis research. The researcher spent a considerable amount of time living in both communities, became accepted as part of the community and was invited to participate in several community activities, including the Shoal Lake Family Camp.

Within Shoal Lake Cree Nation, some degree of adaptation is necessary to reduce vulnerabilities to future change (Ermine *et al.* 2008, Johnston *et al.* 2008, Pittman 2008). However, current social conditions and problems, including gangs, violence, substance abuse and divisions within the community, are limiting coping mechanisms needed to reduce vulnerability to climate change and other stressors (Johnston *et al.* 2008). Shoal Lake Cree Nation has centuries of experience developing strategies to build capacity to cope with change. For example, community camping excursions are used to diffuse social problems. This paper investigates the significance of the community's Family Camp as a coping strategy for multifaceted change.

What is Family Camp?

Family Camp is a planned community camping event in the traditional lands known as the *sipanik* territory. Community members are encouraged to camp together in the forest for one week in late July or early August. There is some planned entertainment, such as live bands featuring local musicians;

however, the Family Camp primarily promotes impromptu exchanges of knowledge and friendship between all groups from all social locations within Shoal Lake Cree Nation. Everyone is welcome and alcohol is prohibited.

Elders believe that youth reliance on drugs and alcohol results from the loss of traditional culture and unstable home lives (Ermine *et al.* 2008). They devised plans to send the youth troubled with substance abuse, gangs, and violence, out into the wilderness to learn traditional values and knowledge so they were better prepared to adapt to life's challenges. Family Camp evolved from these early plans. Other age groups were eager to participate in the camps and began joining the youth. Originally, participation was limited to those few families who could afford camping supplies (e.g. tents, sleeping bags) and who were familiar with living in the wilderness. The value of families camping in the wilderness on the overall community wellbeing was quickly recognized by community leaders. Shoal Lake Cree Nation band council acknowledged the significance of the initiative to building community unification and social capital. With funds received from First Nations Trust (Saskatchewan Indian Gaming Association casinos place 50% of revenues into the First Nations Trust), the Shoal Lake Cree Nation band council purchased tents, subsidized food costs, and named the event Family Camp in order to ensure everyone interested could participate.

Significance and Discussion

Family Camp begins as people filter into the predetermined campsite in the *sipanik* (forest). The first task for families is to clear deadfall to make room for their tents, which are quickly set up in family clusters. Kitchen countertops are constructed

using hammers, nails, and whatever good wood can be found nearby.

Once the family campsite is prepared, a central community fire pit is built in a clearing and tarps are strung high in the trees to protect the campfire area from rain. This area is extremely important; it is where food, tea, and conversations are shared as community members mingle.

Family members share the work involved with setting up their own camp and then turn to helping neighbours. This facilitates bonding between community members; grudges are replaced with goodwill, youth learn by watching or participating with Elders, family and community members.

Once the camp is set up, it functions as a place for knowledge exchange and the building of social capital. Elders' knowledge is easily accessible. Unlike in town where Elders have few visitors dropping in to their homes, at Family Camp there is a constant sharing of traditional activities and values with all community members. Individuals learn by listening to Elders' stories and observing Elders doing daily tasks, such as preparing bannock or duck soup over the campfire. Listening and observing are acknowledged by many community members as the principle mechanism for learning cultural values and traditional skills, respectively (Pittman 2008). At Family Camp, youth access traditional skills and cultural values; both are important resources for avoiding negative behaviours, such as substance abuse, gangs and violence. Positive behaviours increase the capacity of the whole community to cope with change.

Youth become exposed to living in nature during Family Camp. Adapting to living with the natural environment and environmental stressors, such as rain storms, is taught by Elders to youth. Youth learn and apply traditional coping strategies in real life situations during Family Camp. Cultural values useful in positive adaptation, such as flexibility,

preparedness, ingenuity, creativity and respect for nature, are thus preserved. Youth capacities to cope with environmental stressors and change are increased as their interactions with Elders facilitate knowledge transfer, building community unification.

Activities at Family Camp also build social capital. Visiting from campsite to campsite is encouraged and community members often spend hours fishing or conversing, and helping each other with vehicles getting stuck or other daily activities. Bonding that occurs at Family Camp helps to alleviate stresses created with unresolved grudges and jealousies occurring in town. The resulting social capital can be employed back in town, when confronting collective problems.

Swampy Cree Perspective

Connection with the land is an important part of the Swampy Cree cultural perspective – one that has become threatened in recent times as First Nations find themselves increasingly colonized by Western traditions. Family Camp allows for the reconnection of First Nations with the land and nature; strengthening traditional beliefs. These beliefs provide the grounds for mutually respectful relationships with the natural world, contributing to the existence of healthy and sustainable ecosystems. According to these beliefs, the natural world is made up of numerous ‘societies’; each species has its respective society. All societies must communicate and negotiate the terms upon which the ecosystem functions. For example, the moose society allocates a certain number of moose to fall prey to hunters; hunters promise to respect and give thanks to the moose they harvest, usually by offering tobacco and prayers following a successful hunt. Central to this perspective is the belief that humans can tell nature what

they need and nature will provide if the humans asking are spiritually connected to the land. Participation in Family Camp allows community members to step outside of their urbanized Western world and re-establish cultural linkages with nature.

Concerns

Despite efforts to ensure the participation of all community members, there are still a few who do not participate. Individuals with young babies are unwilling to camp in the wilderness for fear their child's immune system is unable to cope in that environment. A small number of other individuals avoid participating for other reasons, thereby losing the opportunity to learn from and bond with community members.

Some participating individuals travel back to town to shower or make phone calls, separating themselves from the more traditional experiences. A few individuals leave the Family Camp area to party, limiting the usefulness of Family Camp for community unification and building social bonds.

Ancestors depended on the natural world for the tools and resources needed to survive. Creativity and ingenuity was developed from lifetimes of learning to utilize materials found in nature. This still occurs in the camp today, as much of the infrastructure (benches, tables, fire pits, shelters, etc.) is constructed onsite out of materials found in the forest; however, modern technology, such as canvas tents and propane stoves, is also used for some basic aspects of survival. These useful items restrict an individual's wilderness experience; however, the use of modern technology also testifies to the adaptability of First Nations, First Nations

willingness to accept change, and First Nations ingenuity in applying modern tools in a traditional context.

The most serious concern is the failure to sustain the beneficial effects of Family Camp when people return to the community setting. Social capital, community unity and traditional knowledge are applied in the community for a few weeks following the camp, then old jealousies, grudges, substance abuse, gang activities and violence returns, seemingly undoing the positive adaptation skills developed and reinforced at Family Camp. More frequent camps would be useful in increasing the long lasting effects in the community.

Conclusions

Planned community camping excursions have been successfully employed by Shoal Lake Cree Nation to cope with and alleviate stresses from various social, environmental, cultural, and political changes. These camps serve as a means of experiencing nature, transferring knowledge between generations, building human capital or community unification, and increasing bonding social capital within the community while alleviating constraining social stresses from substance abuse, violence, gangs and social fragmentation. Such knowledge and capitals are applied at the camp to resolve collective problems. Individuals feel the positive effects from Family Camp are short lived once everyone returns to the community. More frequent camps may increase the potential for lasting positive effects of Family Camp; however, limited funding limits the number of community organized camps.

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