

Isi Askiwan – The State of the Land: Prince Albert Grand Council Elders' Forum on Climate Change



SUMMARY DOCUMENT

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A Dene settlement on a northern lake

This summary report provides an overview of the findings from the Prairie Adaptation Research Collaborative project, Isi Askiwan - The State of the Land: Prince Albert Grand Council Elders' Forum on Climate Change. The full report is at the PARC website (www.parc.ca). Click on the link to "research publications" and "Communities/Socio-Economic".

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Introduction

This summary report provides an overview of the findings from the Prairie Adaptation Research Collaborative project, *Isi Askiwan - The State of the Land: Prince Albert Grand Council Elders' Forum on Climate Change*. In February 2004, Elders and other First Nations knowledge holders from the Prince Albert Grand Council area in Saskatchewan came together to discuss the impacts of climate change on population health within their traditional territories. The Elders' forum was based on respectful learning and traditional protocols in which Elders could share information about climate change with one another and with members of the scientific community. Three basic objectives guided the Elders' discussion:

- To identify what has been experienced or observed by the Elders in regards to climate change;
- To identify the impacts of these changes on the health and quality of life of Aboriginal communities;
- For the Elders to communicate the capacity of communities in adapting to these changes, both in the past and in the future.

Elder responses to this issue are identified and discussed, along with a number of broad themes such as the connection between the natural and social environment, and the conciliation of Elder knowledge and western scientific perspectives on climate change. To date, discussions of climate change have been dominated by western science. By engaging in these issues, communities, under the leadership of Elders, have the opportunity to contribute knowledge to the broader Canadian society concerning perspectives and possible approaches to climate change, and in particular the relationship between health and the natural environment. This information is placed within the broader context of the growing literature on traditional environmental knowledge.

The Elders' Forum

This project highlights the contribution of Elders and other traditional knowledge holders to the discussion of the impacts of climate change. It is argued that First Nations' perspectives of the natural world can enhance western scientific research and understanding about the natural forces of climate change. The Elders' forum was an appropriate and important venue for documenting this knowledge and for developing a better understanding of the relationship between healthy communities and healthy environments. Elders can bring forward the collective wisdom of countless generations living in particular geographic locations, adding considerable

depth to society's view of climate change and human adaptation. Some of the earliest studies on traditional environmental knowledge (TEK) in Canada took place in the Arctic. They were directed towards documenting traditional land use and occupancy to support land claim negotiations.¹ These studies brought to the forefront the extensive knowledge held by Indigenous communities about their traditional territories. They provided the foundation for the growing literature on the application of TEK to the management of resources and the development of co-management regimes,² environmental impact assessments,³ conservation and sustainable development,⁴ and environmental history.⁵

To explore the issues of climate change, a First Nations traditional learning tool – an Elders' forum – was identified as the most appropriate methodology. This method was chosen not only because of the solid foundation laid by previous Prince Albert Grand Council (PAGC) initiatives, but also in recognition of a number of important benefits. First, by following traditional protocols and incorporating cultural events, the Elders' forum provided an appropriate setting in which the Elders could share their information. Second, the forum brought together knowledgeable Elders from a wide range of geographically and culturally diverse First Nations. Third, this format allowed information to be shared among communities as well as between First Nations and academic people. Finally, the Elders' forum provided a foundation for future initiatives such as focused case studies and/or further development of the Elders' forum as determined by the interests of the Elders.



Plains Cree Sector Group Discussion

Following the completion of the forum, the audio recordings were translated and transcribed. These transcripts were analyzed using the qualitative data analysis software package Atlas.ti in order to tease out the broader themes and connections. A video production of the main themes from the Elders' forum was also developed and a copy given to each Elder participant. It should be noted that careful and thoughtful work is needed to bring

different knowledge traditions together on common issues such as environmental change and health. As much as western knowledge gathering is guided by principles of knowledge production and reproduction, the First Nations knowledge tradition similarly operates under a set of guidelines or protocols.

Themes

The Elders' forum produced results on a number of different levels. Specific information was shared about the changes in climate and environment observed by Elders in their traditional territories. A detailed analysis of this information is contained in the main report. This summary report identifies a number of broad themes that emerged from the gathering. The primary themes include: traditional environmental knowledge, the connection between the natural and social environment, water quality and quantity, and a variety of other themes in the area of environmental health.

Traditional Environmental Knowledge

Look at all of us sitting around in this room. There is over 2,000 years of life sitting around here and an average of 55 years; there is 2,000 years of life experience and knowledge here.

Bill Ermine

The value of the Elder perspective is that they have a holistic interpretation of the climate change concept and therefore relate to climate change as a broader process that goes beyond western scientific hypotheses and measurements. For the Elders, the discussion of climate change encompasses the socio-cultural aspects of their lifestyle, along with the environment and the physical climate that is often the focus of scientific inquiry. Most of the Elders approached the discussion at the three-day forum from the touchstone of their traditional life and understandings. Many of the Elders' lifestyles are intimately connected to the natural environment through trapping, hunting, fishing, and other means of northern livelihood. They spoke of the land with passion that in many ways was like an honouring to a lifestyle that provided for their health and well-being. The traditional way of life in the northern forests was marked by self-sufficiency. The Elders described a dynamic and flexible use of the environment for their survival as well as for their material culture. Traditional life included the possession of cultural skills that not only ensured food for the table, but also facilitated "value-added" use of the natural provisions acquired from the land.

Increasingly, western scientists and academics are recognizing the importance and value of the traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) held by Elders and other

members of Indigenous communities. As the issue of climate change has become a growing concern, Indigenous people, and Elders in particular, have begun to add their voices and observations to the body of knowledge about this issue. This has particularly been the case in northern regions where livelihood activities often remain tied to the land. Recent initiatives in this area point to the growing need for collaboration between western scientists and Indigenous communities to understand and address climate change issues. The PAGC Elders' forum on climate change is one contribution to this process.

Elder Perspectives

As we see rivers flow, as it swirls, it is also giving thanks that it is still flowing on this earth. It is giving thanks as we give thanks for movement. That is the way it is for their movement as well. Giving thanks to the force.

Clara Whitecap



Woodland Cree Sector Group Discussion

Elders' perceptions of the natural environment are important in understanding the complex array of challenging questions presented by global climate change. The Elders believe that by understanding the spiritual world, society can more readily understand the functioning of the natural world. This fundamental principle of First Nations thought is often discounted in western scientific circles. However, understanding its value can lead to insights about the various profiles of climate change just as it would on many other important issues. Accordingly, one of the emergent results from the Elders forum relates to the way the issue of climate change is framed. In the western scientific perspective, climate change is largely a physical phenomenon that is observable and can be documented and presented in highly organized ways even if its causes and impacts are not yet clearly understood. There can be no doubt that

scientific data collection and instrumentation is valuable in charting an understanding of the various phenomena that would induce climate change. The issue for the Elders, it would seem, is that these observable global changes have been singularly isolated and been prematurely labelled by western scientists as the primary dimension of “climate change.” The central issue from this western perspective has been the observation of physical changes in global weather and climate both in temporal and spatial manner with the effect that the human realm has been largely removed. The value of the Elders’ perspective is to reprioritize the human element both in terms of impacts and responsibility. As Jeremy Hayward has stated, “it is just that the modern description leaves out so much – it leaves out the sacredness, the livingness, the soul of the world.”⁶

Convergence with Scientific Data

As we meet here, we do not control our selves, our lives. We have been destined to all meet here collectively to discuss how we are progressing. What can benefit our children, to discuss that.

Clara Whitecap

For the most part, the observations of the PAGC Elders reinforced, confirmed and animated scientific observations on climate change in Saskatchewan. Of all the southern regions in Canada, the Prairie Provinces are likely to experience the greatest increase in temperatures. This will likely result in increased aridity over a larger area in Saskatchewan, and more frequent and severe periods of drought, especially in the southern region. The availability of water will be a significant concern, as run-off from glaciers in the Rocky Mountains declines. In more northern regions, the increase in frequency and intensity of forest fires will likely be a concern. Compared to southern regions, the northern region of Saskatchewan has fewer historical weather monitoring stations that have recorded temperature, rainfall and wind. This information gap can be filled in part by proxy environmental measures, as well as by the oral histories that have been passed on from generation to generation in Indigenous communities. One of the main goals in assembling the PAGC Elders for this Forum was to draw on that source of oral knowledge. In addition, PARC has recognized the importance of researching the social, as well as physical, impacts of climate change in the Prairie Provinces. As observed by the Elders, there is a deep connection between the health of the physical environment, and the holistic health of individuals, families and communities.

It is certain that the Elders have experienced a range of weather and climate patterns in their own lives. Each of the Elders tempered their discussion of climate and weather changes with their experiences and observations about natural forces. The Elders had trust that the weather changes or even the patterns of climate, in and of themselves, were part of ‘existence.’ They could adapt to these local changes because they had always had to live within the patterns of nature. Based on this adaptive response to the exigencies of living in nature, under differing conditions, the Elders recognized that weather changes from year to year are part of the normal pattern of nature. However, Elders talked about observations of extreme seasonal weather events like tornadoes and hailstorms that, for many, were a seldom occurrence in their regions in the past. Some Elders spoke of the changing patterns of the seasons observed in recent times. These shifts in seasonal character were perhaps more worrisome and foretold of the more serious nature of climate change compared to isolated events. For example, summer and autumn seasonal conditions were observed to extend further into the traditionally “winter” months. Recently, the summers were also observed as being abnormally dry with no appreciable effect on moisture levels even after rainfall. The Elders said that these seasonal shifts and sudden extreme conditions contributed to the unpredictability of weather. These observations also converged with the western scientific projections.

Water

Our water is polluted. Even though we have running water, we were told not to drink it unless we boil it thoroughly. Our rivers don't barely flow anymore... we used to drink that water. Now they are stagnant and not fit for drinking.

Lillian Lathlin

A recurring observation made by the Elders, though one that took on specific characteristics in particular geographic locations, was around the quality and quantity of water in their territories. Elders from all regions of the Prince Albert Grand Council area discussed water in terms of its importance to their livelihoods. The Elders have clear memories of an abundance of pristine water sources in their territories. Over time, the Elders have noticed the quantity and quality of water deteriorating in their territories. Water quality was often mentioned in relation to industrial activities. The Elders emphasized that water is the source of life for all living things. Yet, human activity is seriously impacting the availability and quality of that water.



Fog lifting from a lake in Canada's north.

Wildlife

Even the animals are starting to venture out of their territory also. It is because of changes started to occur in their environment. There are many changes going on with us. Last summer in our Black Lake community, people had seen some cougars around there. There never used to be any pelicans in the Lake Athabasca area and now there are some pelicans in the far north region. The people had seen the white-tailed deer around the Big Bear Lake and polar bear in Saskatchewan.

Pierre Robillard

The Elders at the Prince Albert Forum continually expressed a sincere regard for the wildlife with whom they shared the landscape. This concern extended to an anxiety about the possible implications any change of climate might have on wildlife in their areas. The Elders observed that there was a general imbalance in nature reflected in the condition of wildlife, and probably resulting from human influence. This imbalance in nature was deduced from the abnormal ways that wildlife behaved and extended to the



Dene Sector Discussion Group

changes in wildlife migration patterns and population ranges within their territories, as observed by the Elders. New species are starting to inhabit areas where they were not previously seen. Birds not commonly seen in specific regions were observed and animals were wandering into areas far from their usual range. For example, species such as cougars, pelicans, and white-tailed deer were observed in northern regions where they were not previously known.

Seasons

The elders used to say that this was a pattern in between moons and the cold would once again resume. This was the pattern. It was a pattern of changes. That is it.

Elizabeth Charles

In regards to the impacts of climate change, the Elders made several observations concerning population health. The extreme conditions of both summer and winter were a particular source of worry. For example, the immediate effect of increased summer heat on the health of the people (especially children and the elderly) was a concern brought out by the Elders. Unpredictability of weather due to changing patterns in climate was catching people off guard in terms of their preparedness for outdoor activities. The Elders also noted that the heat of the summer impacts the natural world. Plants (including trees and berry-producing shrubs) are showing the effects of heat and associated drought conditions, and useful products from these sources are no longer as abundant. The temperature and climate changes may also have a bearing on other changes taking place. For instance, in economic terms, the quality and thickness of the winter coats of fur-bearing animals are affected by changes in the weather. In this sense, the livelihood of northern people engaged in trapping is affected.

Connections between the Natural and Social Environment

But since the changes took place, there have been many storms, in a slow way, just like as children grow in a slow way, that is the way it was for us. Changes were slowly taking place in our land.

Hector Head

The Elders clearly see the importance of sustaining connections to the land and environment as a foundation for maintaining cultural continuity and as the basis for healthy individuals and communities. In their view, when the people become disconnected from the land, the lines of communication between the natural and social worlds are severed resulting in less influence on the depersonalized



The northern boreal forest.

universe. How well society understands and acts upon the human-nature relationship may have a bearing on how well it can come to grips with issues of climate change. As partners in the forum, the Elders challenged each other, the western scientific community, and society at large to adopt a consciousness about the living natural world and to recommit to personal relationships and efforts to understand its natural rhythms and patterns. For the Elders, the scientific response to climate change, with a focus on adaptation, suggests an acquiescence to society's failure to hold an environmental ethic. Some Elders suggested that perhaps "adaptation" was not the best response that perhaps action would be more appropriate to halt some of the changes that are occurring.

Prophesies

I heard old people say how the future is going to unfold. That way, a person can look at these spoken words (teachings). We can see the unsettled weather showing in the horizon. We can see the storm clouds gathering because of the things happening with Mother Earth.

Robert Ermine

Prophesies regarding significant changes and events happening to the land was a reoccurring theme in the Elders' discussion of climate change. These prophesies would have been a traditional mechanism for adaptation, as they prepared people for the future. The prophesies that the Elders discussed served to emphasize the importance of paying attention not only to traditional teachings but also to the land.

Native Science

We had people who can predict the season, actually all year. We had people like that because they used to watch what was happening.

Velma Buffalo

Perhaps one of the most fundamental and promising adaptive strategies that the Elders suggested was a return to native science in dealing with natural phenomena. Native science stems from an intricate knowledge of the environment through a history of close connection with the land and its order. From this study came the acute knowledge about nature and its various messages, much of which is passed down through the oral tradition. As an example, an Elder recounted behaviors of bees that presaged the kind of winter to expect. According to the Elders, the display of northern lights had meanings. Animal behavior was also acutely observed and predicted upon.

Dialogue

I was really thinking about those people that came here today. That is the proper attitude that they have to be able to think about these things as they were showing the visuals. I don't really deny any of it because that understanding is a result of the education that they have received.

Jean Beatty

An interesting feature of the Elders' forum was the inclusion of a presentation by the PARC research coordinator. The presentation gave the western scientific perspective on climate change in Saskatchewan. This presentation sparked a lively exchange between Elders and researchers. It provided them with a rare opportunity to ask questions of one another and share observations. The Elders' forum attempted to reconcile how academics and Elders can work together and how cultural knowledge traditions, guided by differing worldviews, can cooperate and form partnerships in the pursuit of knowledge. The academic writers who are linked to the Elders' forum are perceived as *oskapiwis* – a Cree word which translates loosely as "servant" – to the First Nations knowledge system. The facilitators, academics, and



Swampy Cree Discussion Group

writers associated with the Elders' forum need to work from a position that is reflective and respectful of both knowledge systems. This kind of work must be carefully crafted to foster a mutual appreciation for working together and to pave the way for future endeavours. The Elders' forum described in this paper initiated an exchange, a discussion between the First Nations and western community regarding the importance of knowledge from different perspectives. The Elders' forum contributed to the process of bringing together traditional environmental knowledge and western scientific understanding in attempts to understand the complexity of climate change.

Conclusion

The Elders at the forum linked the natural environment to human responsibility. There was a strong sentiment expressed by the Elders that it was their responsibility to keep and protect the land for future generations, but that society as a whole would have to re-establish its priorities and respectful attitudes towards the land to bring things back into balance. The Elders expressed a wish to take action, but were concerned about their ability to influence the activities of industrial corporations. Some Elders felt that additional research would be beneficial in gaining a better understanding of the state of the land and the issues that are currently facing society. Cooperation between sectors of society was strongly emphasized by the Elders because all people have to live together on this Earth. According to the Elders, the forum itself was a part of the solution and Elders expressed particular appreciation for the involvement of western scientists in the discussion of climate change.

The Elders at the PAGC Elders forum clearly recognized a need for changing the status quo – in terms of revitalizing the relationship between people and the land – as a way of addressing climate change and other environmental issues. However, the Elders decided by consensus at the forum that their role was not a political one. They purposefully refrained from making resolutions and formal recommendations. The Elders identified that their role in response to the current situation was to strengthen their own local communities and cultural connections to the land, particularly through working with the youth. By implication, it is the role of western scientists, and in particular those present at the Elders' forum, to share the information from the forum to the broader society and to decision-makers as a way of motivating and influencing change in the western sphere.

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