

Incorporating traditional ecological knowledge into environmental assessments — Labrador experience

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Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) represents a way of viewing the world as seen by indigenous people whose cultures rely extensively on natural resources, and whose economy is described as “subsistence-based”. In many regions of Canada, and especially in the north, aboriginal cultures retain knowledge about natural processes, organized in a manner consistent with traditional belief systems and spirituality. Thoughts are organized in a manner which reflects this set of beliefs, and establishes cause and effect relationships in a manner supported by long term observations of natural phenomena. This knowledge base covers subjects such as weather and climate, characteristics of food sources (including mystical and medicinal properties), ecological relationships, animal behaviour, and sustainability.

TEK has become important as a key requirement in environmental assessment. It is needed in providing an adequate description of the existing environment, i.e., the baseline against which anticipated project changes will be compared. TEK must be taken into account in defining the scope of an environmental impact assessment. The process of issues scoping must take into account the perceptions and values of affected aboriginal peoples, and they are required to be consulted early in the environmental impact assessment process. TEK can be important in prediction of environmental

effects, as well as the identification of acceptable and effective mitigation and monitoring measures. TEK is regarded as a body of knowledge which is communal, rather than individual property, therefore the informed consent of the community is required as an essential prerequisite to any information collection activity. It is important to adhere strictly to protocols which are in place to provide this consent.

While TEK has become an essential ingredient of environmental impact assessments where projects can affect indigenous people, there is little documented advice available from government regulatory or research agencies. The Voisey's Bay Mine/Mill Environmental Assessment provided two sets of experience which illustrate the challenges associated with incorporation of TEK into an Environmental Impact Statement. The experience with Labrador Inuit Association showed the greater promise. Key ingredients of success included: the selection of capable and mutually acceptable research staff who facilitated the process; direct personal interaction between company officials and residents over periods of several days, and on several occasions; approaching interactions without preconceptions and with an attitude of mutual respect; and spending time in the country, where knowledge and skills can be best communicated.