2023

The Role of Traditional Environmental Knowledge in Planetary Well-Being

Deborah McGregor
Danika Billie Littlechild
Mahisha Sritharan

Source Publication:
THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL KNOWLEDGE IN PLANETARY WELL-BEING

Deborah McGregor, Danika Littlechild and Mahisha Sritharan

Introduction

In 2012, two decades after the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also known as the Earth Summit, Indigenous peoples returned to Rio de Janeiro to gather in Kari-Oka Village, at Sacred Kari-Oka Púku, to further dialogue on the meaning and practice of sustainable development. The gathering generated the “Kari-Oca 2 Declaration” and conveyed a distinct conception of sustainable development outlined below:

Mother Earth is the source of life which needs to be protected, not a resource to be exploited and commodified as a “natural capital.” We have our place and our responsibilities within Creation’s sacred order. We feel the sustaining joy as things occur in harmony with the Earth and with all life that it creates and sustains. We feel the pain of disharmony when we witness the dishonor of the natural order of Creation and the continued economic colonization and degradation of Mother Earth and all life upon her. Until Indigenous Peoples’ rights are observed and respected, sustainable development and the eradication of poverty will not be achieved.

(Kari-Oca 2 Declaration 2012)

‘Sustainable development’ is a term used widely in the mainstream development world. The 1987 Brundtland Report, Our Common Future, gave the most recognized definition: “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland 1987). The idea is that it is possible to meet human development goals while also sustaining natural resources and ecosystems. The term has been highly contested, with many arguing it is just a cover, a “green-washing,” of continued capitalistic expansion. Indigenous peoples have been at the forefront of these debates. At every global environmental, sustainable development, and climate change gathering held over the past three decades, Indigenous nations have expressed skepticism regarding the concept of “sustainable development” (McGregor 2021). In part, “sustainable development”, conceptually and in practice has been employed ultimately to continue the exploitation of Indigenous peoples, their lands and the Earth (McGregor 2004). Indigenous peoples continue to strive
Deborah McGregor et al.

to change the narrative of sustainable development to one that includes Indigenous peoples’ vision for living well with the Earth (McGregor 2016).

Indigenous peoples organize their societies, including the development of governance, legal and knowledge systems, in ways that imbue or relate to the concept of sustainability (Whyte et al. 2016; Whyte 2018; McGregor 2019; Parsons and Fisher 2020). “This way of living was supported by Indigenous knowledge systems, principles, and laws that ensured that people’s activities would affirm life, rather than denigrate or destroy it” (McGregor 2019: 241). It is something that has been part of “Indigenous Knowledge Systems” (IKS) for many generations in many different forms and terms depending on the Indigenous community and their language. The term IKS refers to the broader political, legal, economic, and cultural systems that enable the continued generation and renewal of Indigenous peoples to ensure well-being (McGregor 2018).

Yet Western knowledge systems dominate international development discourses around sustainability, conservation, climate change, and the environment (Latulippe and Klenk 2020; McGregor et al. 2020). Space for other ways of knowing, especially Indigenous Knowledge Systems, are often excluded or treated as inferior to Western Knowledge. Recently, however, because of environmental challenges, including climate change, biodiversity loss, and the growing recognition of the need for sustainability, IKS have started to be recognized after years of being pushed to the margin (McGregor 2014; Tengö et al. 2017; United Nations 2015). While this can be seen as a positive advance, in this chapter we argue that the seeking of Indigenous Knowledge in Western institutions and knowledge spheres has led to harmful practices that tend to be extractive in nature of Indigenous peoples and their knowledge (McGregor 2021; Eckert et al. 2020). We argue that to have a just and productive interchange of knowledge requires not only an understanding of what is meant by IKS and TEK but that Indigenous peoples also need to be given the space to be involved as active, equal partners in order to share their knowledge (Fox et al. 2017).

This chapter explores these ongoing arguments through a conversation between two Indigenous legal scholars: Deborah McGregor (Anishinaabe from Whitefish River First Nation, Birch Island, Ontario, Canada) and Danika Littlechild (Cree from Ermineskin Cree Nation, Neyaskweyahk, Maskwacis (Alberta), Canada). Oral storytelling is part of many Indigenous communities’ culture and is part of how knowledge is shared and passed along through generations. Kovach (2009) states that “[t]he interrelationship between story and knowing cannot be traced back to any specific starting time within tribal societies, for they have been tightly bound since time immemorial as a legitimate form of understanding” (95). The colonial history and power imbalances between settlers and Indigenous peoples have led to the intentional exclusion of Indigenous ways of knowing for many years in mainstream Western knowledge, which is why incorporating Indigenous methodology is imperative as it acts as “decolonizing research” (Kovach 2009: 103).

On June 22, 2020, Deborah McGregor and Danika Littlechild came together to discuss IKS and sustainability (see McGregor and Littlechild 2020 for full video details). Through sharing their experiences and discussing their own positionality, McGregor and Littlechild discuss how they have navigated these systems dominated by Western Knowledge and how they have found meaningful ways to create space for and work with Indigenous Knowledge Systems and traditional ecological knowledge “in a good way.” Through their discussions, McGregor and Littlechild unpack years of misconception of TEK and IKS and shed light on how to see, understand, and speak about TEK and IKS, focusing, in particular, on how to work with Indigenous peoples for environmental sustainability and conservation efforts.
The Role of Traditional Environmental Knowledge

Defining Traditional Environmental Knowledge and Indigenous Knowledge Systems

DEBORAH MCDONALD (DM): […] As a scholar [of environmental justice and Indigenous Knowledge Systems], I find a lot of my work has been trying to get people to understand what traditional knowledge is and then how it can be applied in various contexts. The center of how I approach that is Indigenous knowledge/traditional knowledge is not new; it’s new in policy circles, legislation circles, internationally and at every level. […] [T]he way that I look at it is Indigenous knowledge systems were important to Indigenous peoples for thousands of years. It’s new to other people more recently, over the last few decades, but it’s not new to Indigenous peoples and it can stand on its own – is sort of the message I try to convey.

DANIELA LITTLEFIELD (DL): […] in terms of positionality, I would say that I’m in kind of an interesting space right now because I practiced law for a few decades in Alberta, nationally and internationally and in that time, really just focused all my energy on lifting up and supporting the work of Indigenous peoples. And now I’ve taken on this new role as a [law] professor in a large university. And so it’s been so interesting to sort of have the history and the experience of how knowledge of Indigenous peoples have been treated in terms of advocacy of Indigenous peoples in the few decades that I practiced law and now how I see it treated in the context of the academy, in the context of research and how some people are thinking about this issue as a “topic” so to speak.

[…] I really focused a lot of my energy over these past number of years in lifting up and trying to elevate the knowledge holders, the Elders, and the leaders from our Indigenous nations and communities who deserve to be recognized appropriately and adequately in the context of how we interact as Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. This is about how we are connected to and behave in relation to Mother Earth and in regards to our sort of ethical move forward. So that’s where a lot of my interest in the Conservation as Reconciliation (CPR) project as well in the idea and concept of ‘ethical space’ described by Cree thinker Willie Ermine and professor at First Nation University arose.

DM: So in terms of what is Indigenous Knowledge Systems […] it’s always one of the questions that people want to know. What I will say is that people have different understandings [of these terms] because there’s a huge diversity of Indigenous peoples and when it’s rooted in language and it comes from the land and peoples culture and identity it’s going to be different.

[…] The term TEK is not a term that came from Indigenous communities because we have our own words and our own language for our knowledge. Early on, Indigenous people reacted to how others were conceptualizing Indigenous peoples and our knowledge. Initially people were approaching Indigenous Knowledge Systems as data and information that was going to be extracted from Indigenous people and communities. So, [they would want to] put TEK in a report, put it on a map or database; but it is a whole system of knowledge. It’s a whole system that’s built into the society and meant to support the goals of society, which for the Anishinaabeg, is to support life. […] So, our knowledge is part of the system with laws and governance and everything else that supports it. So, it’s very hard to take a piece of it and stick it into other people’s societies and their goals that may or may not be shared with Indigenous peoples. It’s part of this whole system of how society functions and how the society transforms and changes over time to meet its challenges, so it doesn’t stay static. […]
Deborah McGregor et al.

[...] It is not really appropriate to remove it from the people. That’s where TEK lies. It lies in the community; it lies in the everyday lived experience. Indigenous languages tend to be verb-based so it’s traditional knowledge is what you do. I can pull out TEK reports and say: “The reports that describe aspects of traditional knowledge but are actually not traditional knowledge itself. They’re representations of it.” So it’s important that others recognise that it lives in the people and is meant to support the people. Indigenous people are quite happy to share it when they don’t think the best decisions are being made for the Earth that they rely on for their livelihood and for the future.

[...] You can’t really protect Indigenous knowledge or have access to Indigenous knowledge unless you’re willing to protect and support people. Because that’s where it lies. A lot of the times you see the narrative [in non-Indigenous institutions]: we want to include traditional knowledge. And I say, “Well you can’t do that unless you’re talking to people. You want to protect traditional knowledge, well, you can’t do that unless you protect the people and their rights and their livelihood.”

[...] One of the reasons why traditional knowledge [...] is really important to Indigenous peoples because it enabled us to survive genocide and historical and ongoing colonization, and it’s basically needed for our future. Youth would really like access to and to learn this knowledge so they can then live up to their responsibilities to ensure the continuance of life [...] For example, McGregor has written about a central ethical value in Anishinaabe and Cree cultures, minobimaatisiwin, which can be translated as “good life” or “continuous rebirth.” This value is embedded within a holistic worldview, and thus involves “living on respectful and reciprocal terms with all of Creation at individual and collective levels.” “Minobimaatisiwin requires one to act sustainably: to take responsibility for and be spiritually connected to all of Creation, all of the time.” “This way of living was supported by Indigenous knowledge systems, principles, and laws that ensured that people’s activities would affirm life, rather than denigrate or destroy it” (McGregor 2019: 241).

Minobimaatisiwin does not apply to humanity alone – it is not strictly a human endeavor. All beings have the potential to realize Minobimaatisiwin. The relationships that Anishinabek are responsible for include those with all entities and beings in the world, some of which have far more power than humans. Minobimaatisiwin points to the responsibility to seek well-being with other orders of beings or persons through processes of relational accountability (McGregor 2021). Arguably, concepts of sustainability that extend to the non-human world are reflected in the emerging scholarship and movement on the rights of nature/personhood of nature. This was notably reflected in the Universal Declaration on the Rights of Mother Earth, the outcome document of the World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth, held in Cochabamba, Bolivia in 2010. Minobimaatisiwin offers more than a philosophy, it guides a way to live, a responsibility to live in a manner that supports the well-being of Mother Earth.

DL: Yes, I think there’s so much value in talking about and emphasizing the connection between knowledge and real, living people. I think that has been, to my mind, one of the hurdles that we potentially are still grappling with in terms of inter-societal relations. We have treaties, agreements, and other constructive arrangements between and amongst Indigenous peoples as well as between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and we have emerging standards coming out of the conservation movement and how it is being responsive or trying to be responsive to Indigenous peoples. That’s nationally, internationally, regionally. And we also have the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of
Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which I think is really foundational in the sense that it represents the minimum standards of rights of Indigenous peoples.

[...] I think for me what is really important for us to do and to be mindful about in the work that we – and how we conduct our work and how we co-create our relationships is that we do our best to live with the discomfort and the inconvenience of elevating a [knowledge] system and not information. And I think that's a conscientious choice that we all have to sort of make in the way that we engage with one another in our initiatives, in our activities, in our research projects. We just have to be so mindful of ensuring that we really are elevating the knowledge systems and how knowledge fits into the larger systems of Indigenous peoples. And to me that's one of the big, major steps that I don't think we have really completed or taken in any kind of substantial way because I think that default script that was developed over decades, as Deb was mentioning, about what TEK is or what traditional knowledge is, is still very, very pervasive. I would argue that many really good intentioned, well-tuned-in people actually speak according to that script. [...] It's really hard to shake that idea that Indigenous knowledge is not just information but that it is, indeed, part of Indigenous systems. That if we want to be fully respectful of them, we do have to be willing to engage with Indigenous peoples as experts of themselves and as bona fide holders of their own knowledge.

And sometimes I think that is kind of still a struggle. So, I'm really hopeful for the future because I think a lot of people have indicated their willingness to start to move in that direction. I think what I would like to see are more tangible markers that that transition is happening. So, I've heard a lot of discourse, but I see less movement in terms of formalized and foundational systems change in order to make that transition.

DM: [...] I think about the Indigenous knowledge strategy that the [Canadian] federal government is trying to develop as they sort through the impact assessment process. They are still asking a lot of the same questions from decades ago [...] [The Impact Assessment process] considers potential environmental, health, social and economic impacts of proposed projects, including benefits and Aboriginal and treaty rights. [O]ne of the big challenges is still how to fit traditional knowledge into these other processes. It is not really possible because TEK resides in people and communities and you have to involve people in a meaningful way, and not just when it's convenient. Taking Indigenous peoples knowledge, shuffling off and doing something else with it then it was originally intended is inappropriate. So, we need to ask ourselves different questions. We need a different paradigm for how we approach the work we do.

[...] [O]ne of the challenges is fundamentally about how Indigenous peoples are treated in Canada. So, if that actually doesn't improve, it's very hard to engage with Indigenous knowledge.

Decolonizing Methods

DM: [...] The academy has a big part in what the field looks like because a lot of the methods that are developed for how you engage in Indigenous knowledge research are very extractive. We just try to figure out the most ethical ways of getting this [knowledge] from communities and people. That has to change. It has to switch from different kinds of frameworks for how you engage with people and the kinds of questions that you ask. How does this benefit Indigenous communities? So, a lot of those methods have to change and I would advocate for Indigenous methods themselves which again would be diverse across

207
Deborah McGregor et al.

the country. I don’t think Indigenous knowledge systems can be really fully understood without knowing Indigenous laws and Indigenous governance.

DL: [...] Some of the challenges that we see and I think one of the more controversial questions that I can think of was whether the conservation movement was ready for Indigenous knowledge systems. I think asking that question is useful and I don’t know if it’s really that controversial because as a matter of fact, I know many environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOs) within the conservation movement that have been very explicit about asking themselves that question and have really made sincere efforts toward trying to engage with various Indigenous peoples to find the path forward for their organizations. I think part of it is a sort of decolonization process. As well as, us trying to collectively to become critical thinkers and sort of lateral thinkers around how we can move forward together through some of the challenges that we’re facing right now. And I think the whole reconciliation narrative was a useful term for people to hang their hat on in terms of, you know, what would be like a broadly acceptable, even in a public perspective about how to move forward in engaging with Indigenous knowledge, whether you were an environmental non-governmental organization (ENGO) or a university or what have you, I think a lot of people have sort of latched on to that narrative. [Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action and principles (2015) offer a path for reconciliation that includes supporting Indigenous knowledge systems, laws, protocols and connections to the land (University of Manitoba and UNESCO 2022).]

[...] I think in terms of this overarching question that I had about whether the conservation movement is ready for Indigenous knowledge systems, I think it’s about being ready to, not just make space for Indigenous peoples, which I think has been the default approach of the best of those who are working towards this. But also to sort of to understand that these systems exist whether or not you recognise them. Because they exist – whether or not you recognise them – what’s important is just being willing to allow those systems to function in relation to you without feeling like you have to interfere with them or translate them or even like fully understand or master them in order for a good relationship to proceed.

[...] I was talking to someone from the conservation movement once, earlier this year, and she said, “You know, I don’t really want to talk about Indigenous systems because I don’t know enough about them to speak to them.” And I said, “Well, that’s not what I’m asking you to do. I’m not asking you to be knowledgeable enough about Indigenous systems that you can say that you have some kind of expertise about them. In fact, it’s the very opposite of what I’m asking you to do.” I don’t think we’re asking our allies or partners to try to learn what we know. That’s not the point. The point is for our allies and partners to say these are the knowledge holders and they know about their own systems the way that I know about my systems and the way that I’m recognised as an expert in my field. They must be recognised as experts of their knowledge.

[...] We are grappling not only with the sense of the overarching question about Indigenous knowledge in the context of conservation, but we’re also just sort of more broadly struggling with basically what is appropriate recognition? We are still struggling with that. You know, a lot of people are not satisfied with Canadian jurisprudence. A lot of people are not satisfied even with the minimum standards that are set out in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. And even those standards are not being properly implemented or they are being spoken to but they don’t actually function the way they were intended to. So the result of that is situations like what are being faced by Indigenous peoples who are trying to protect territories from more incursions, more
development like pipelines, who are being criminalized for being land defenders and water defenders who are in fact facing smear campaigns, death threats. I mean, it really does get pretty extreme still. And so even though in the conservation movement it can feel that we are so much further past that we can’t really function in a bubble either. We have to recognize the context in which we’re working when it comes to Indigenous peoples and their knowledge.

[…] And I think we have to be really careful even about that about how do we go about sort of educating ourselves about systems of Indigenous peoples because I think the other sort of default script that has developed is where Indigenous peoples’ perspectives and voices are expected to be contributed on a sort of pro bono, volunteer basis because our ENGO allies or partner or our government partners and allies or even the private sector feels it would be beneficial but they don’t actually want to be engaged in any more substantive way than giving a little honorarium or asking someone to fly somewhere for free for a few days to give their perspective on their organization.

DM: […] Is anyone actually ready for our knowledge? I don’t know how many panels I’ve been on and given a grand total of 10 minutes trying to explain what Indigenous knowledge is and how we understand it. It is somehow – that has to make sense to people to try to figure out how they’re going to try to incorporate that into their work.

I’ll just say again asking the right questions and being able to understand Indigenous knowledge systems on its own terms and to me that’s not as insurmountable as it seems. Because I went through the whole western education system from junior kindergarten up to getting my PhD and I learned somebody else’s knowledge system. I can teach Environmental Impact Assessment. I had to learn somebody else’s worldview and ontology and learn how to function in it. So, I’m thinking: “I think other people can learn.” Because we have to as Indigenous people all the time.

### Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Indigenous Futures

DL: I think though that we also have to be, as I mentioned, aware of the context that Indigenous peoples are functioning within so that even – there’s sort of this dissonance that’s emerging for me where we have some amazing initiatives that are establishing wonderful models and standards moving forward and we have everything else that has come before that has never been addressed or remediated in terms of its impact on Indigenous peoples. And so, it’s sort of like going in a time warp if you look at established national parks and how they treat Indigenous peoples versus a newly established Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area (IISAAAK OLAM Foundation 2019). And we are still continuing to see as I mentioned earlier, the ongoing criminalization of Indigenous peoples in protected areas in this country. And we are also seeing continued peripheralization and exclusion of Indigenous peoples from decision-making over their lands and territories which were usurped or forcibly taken for the purposes of “protection and conservation” in Canada. And so Indigenous peoples basically have no role in decision-making or perhaps maybe an ad hoc advisory role or something that has no real legitimacy in the context of decisions on how lands and waters are stewarded and animals and other resources, I suppose you could say.

And so I think one of the sort of lights that I’ve reached towards in my own journey in this work is the idea and the approach of “ethical space.” “Ethical space” is something that was originally described by Willy Ermine who is a Cree thinker who was also a professor at First Nations University. […] He wrote a paper that was really seminal in how
we have thought about future societal relationship building moving forward and it’s been adapted through different iterations as I’ve seen it raised and thought about in different contexts. [According to Ermine (2007), the “ethical space” is formed “when two societies, with disparate worldviews, are poised to engage each other. It is the thought about diverse societies and the space in between that contributes to the development of a framework for dialogue between human communities” (193).]

I myself have worked – have had the privilege of working with Elders in particular in the province of Alberta in Treaty 6, 7, and 8 on ethical space in the context of health and in the context of conservation, […] climate change, and other topics and in all those conversations, ethical space has sort of provided me with a very useful way of thinking about relationship building, not just sort of between and amongst Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples but also in trying to make that connection back to strengthening and elevating Indigenous systems whether that’s law, language, knowledge, what have you.

Ethical space is also something that is intended to reframe the dialogue that happens between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. It’s intended to elevate Indigenous systems as a whole and not in a piecemeal way. And it’s intended to apply and make functional those rights and standards that I was referencing earlier so things like treaties agreements, other constructive arrangements, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action, Canadian Jurisprudence, and constitutional rights, etcetera. And this would also include emerging standards within the context of conservation […]. So, I really see ethical space as having great potential moving forward. […]

Conclusion

Deborah McGregor and Danika Littlechild’s conversation highlights the challenges to and potentials of recognizing, including, and giving the proper space for Indigenous Peoples and their Knowledge Systems in sustainable development discourse and practice. Undoubtedly, there is still a long way to go in terms of decolonizing practices around research and knowledge sharing in conservation efforts and beyond. Indigenous peoples must, first and foremost, be respected, treated fairly, and have their inherent rights upheld for IKS to be engaged in sustainable development efforts. The discussion underscored the critical importance of ethical space. This is “a framework for guiding respectful interaction across cultural differences in a way that upholds the fundamental integrity of all knowledge systems entering that space” (Government of Canada 2018: 6). It is furthermore a model that creates a space of mutual trust, respect, equality, and collaboration. Only when such an ethical space is created and nurtured can Indigenous Knowledge Systems continue to affirm life and create a balanced relation between humans and the environment.

References


The Role of Traditional Environmental Knowledge


Government of Canada (2018) We Rise Together Achieving Pathway to Canada Target 1 through the Creation of Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas in the Spirit and Practice of Reconciliation, Canada: Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada.

IISAAK OLAM Foundation (2019) Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs) and Ethical Space, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Available at: https://conservation-reconciliation.ca/ipcaspacesources/ipcaspacesources?rq=ethical%20space


University of Manitoba and UNESCO (2022) “National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation Archives,” University of Manitoba and UNESCO, website, available at: https://nctr.ca/records/reports/
