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2014

Indigenous Knowledge

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to our environment. Although now one of the most marginalized and underrepresented groups in the world, much can be learned by indigenous conceptions of health and healing (Bristow, Stephens, & Nettleton, 2003), which may help overcome the barriers to wellness in indigenous populations.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Canada, Quality of Life](#)
- ▶ [Community Resilience](#)
- ▶ [Indigenous Knowledge](#)

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Indigenous Inequality

- ▶ [Indigenous Health Disparities](#)

Indigenous Issues

- ▶ [Indigenous Health Disparities](#)

Indigenous Knowledge

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Synonyms

[Aboriginal knowledge](#); [Local knowledge](#); [Traditional ecological/environmental knowledge \(TEK\)](#); [Traditional knowledge](#)

Definition

The expressions, practices, beliefs, understandings, insights, and experiences of Indigenous groups, generated over centuries of profound interaction with a particular territory.

Description

Indigenous knowledge (IK) includes the expressions, practices, beliefs, understandings, insights, and experiences of Indigenous groups, generated over centuries of profound interaction with a particular territory. Its iterations and mechanisms are unique to each community, even where it shares certain features across groups by virtue of being embedded in a wider, common culture. In all locations IK is the foundation of Indigenous governance, ecological stewardship, social, ethical, linguistic, spiritual, medical, food, and economic systems, so that the continual production and reproduction of local, land-based knowledge is the basis of Indigenous identity and sense of place in the world, as well as of Indigenous groups' very survival as distinct peoples.

Indigenous knowledge is best viewed as a practical engagement – tested, augmented, and refined through generations of land-based practices. It cannot be considered apart from its applications, products, and articulations; this is so much the case that IK as a body is often referred to as a knowledge practice or “praxis.” It is contained in and expressed through songs, stories (including those referred to as myths or legends), proverbs, foods, institutions, skill sets, practices, beliefs, ceremonies, innovations and adaptations, languages, codes of ethics, protocols, art forms, and laws. Indigenous knowledge is highly dynamic, changing in response to both external and internal pressures. It is almost never insular, since few Indigenous groups today live lives bereft of global (particularly Western) influence.

Fundamentally experiential, relational, cumulative, and place-based Indigenous knowledge may be gained or refined through trial and error (experimentation), ritual, intuition or inspiration, observation, dreams or visions, interaction with nonhuman entities (including the land itself), apprenticeship, and peer-to-peer exchanges with other knowledge holders. Transmission is imitative and demonstrative and proceeds according to Indigenous values and cultural protocols governing access, application, generation or refinement, and sharing of knowledge.

This makes the uptake of IK a lengthy undertaking, involving specific, intense responsibilities to one's mentor and community. Direct (e.g., through formal education and intercultural interaction) and indirect (mainly via mainstream media) exposure to nonlocal knowledge can result in its being tested against and critically incorporated into an Indigenous frame. Thus new experiences and new information, rather than inevitably compromising, can validate and invigorate IK, imbuing it with new meaning and relevance. Indigenous knowledge is therefore stable and contemporary, rather than belonging or appealing to some static point in history.

Individual and Communal Aspects of IK

Some Indigenous knowledge will be held by the community as a whole, while other teachings will be held by specific individuals, families, or groups of practitioners (such as healers). Similarly, some knowledge is sacred and is never shared outside of specific community-level, initiation-mediated circles. Indeed, IK is segmentary, so that no one individual can be said to hold the knowledge of the group. Yet Indigenous knowledge is also communal, since it inheres in social practices and reciprocal relationships rather than individuals – it should be thought of not as static understanding, but as an interactive engagement. Further, its distribution in a population is not egalitarian, but varies with experience, expertise, talent, and/or authority – thus the bulk is held by Elders. Many Indigenous groups view knowledge as functioning like biodiversity so that redundancy, overlap, and variation strengthen the system as a whole.

Some Indigenous knowledge is held exclusively by women. Though the boundaries of the female sphere of IK vary from group to group, it often includes medicinal plant cultivation and preparation, maintenance of the seed stock of food crops, monitoring wild populations of small game and edible plants, and trapping and fishing. The decline of women's status under colonialism and the gendered aspects of Western knowledge production combine to render Indigenous women's knowledge especially vulnerable.

Role of Indigenous Knowledge in Quality of Life

The most general ways that IK affects the ► **quality of life** of Indigenous communities are ecological and sociocultural. In terms of ecology, it is the generation and application of IK that allowed most Indigenous communities to achieve an environmental equipoise, maintaining productive livelihoods, managing natural disasters, and conserving and sustainably developing natural resources. Relationships within an ecosystem under Indigenous care are governed by well-developed codes of ethics that extend kinship status to biotic and abiotic, human and nonhuman inhabitants of a specific territory, including plants, animals, watercourses, spiritual beings, weather systems, and geographical features.

Indigenous knowledge is vital for sustaining or retrieving social and cultural values and cohesion in the face of nonindigenous pressures. IK is often used to consciously reconfigure formal knowledge. It can ameliorate the powerful biases and ontological priorities with which academic/scientific understandings are vested and which serve to repeatedly delegitimize and supplant the Indigenous “other.” Reclamation and regeneration of IK is thus part of a wider, pointedly anticolonial struggle of Indigenous resurgence.

Because IK must be practiced to survive, and since Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous identity are mutually constitutive, new and renewed applications of IK have yielded significant successes in Indigenous communities, being central to the quality of life in them. These include the following:

- Heightened health stemming from the reintroduction of traditional foods and Indigenous healing modalities (including primary health care, psychosocial care, and preventative medicine)
- Improved social outcomes through the development of alternative justice mechanisms (versus those of the mainstream criminal justice system, in which Indigenous individuals are disproportionately represented)
- Achievement of greater ecosystem and agroecosystem resilience, along with higher and more nutritious agricultural yields, via

Indigenous environmental stewardship and traditional agricultural practices (protecting and enhancing biodiversity)

- Achievement in both academic and nonacademic spheres by virtue of Indigenous control of Indigenous education and the resurrection of traditional child-rearing practices

Threats to Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Although Indigenous knowledge systems have proven remarkably adaptable to social, cultural, and technological encroachment, their preservation and perpetuation is an ongoing concern. Massive depopulation due to epidemics and malnutrition, immediately upon and for hundreds of years following the arrival of colonial powers in traditional territories, resulted in an incalculable loss of Indigenous knowledge. Subsequently, forced and passive assimilation projects (particularly residential educational and religious conversion programs), incorporation into the cash economy (furthered today by the scaling-up of neoliberal economic globalization), outmigration for employment or education, enclosure and encroachment, modern “community economic development” initiatives, and the environmental degradation associated with industrialization have weakened or severed the individual’s bond with land and community, on which the generation and regeneration of Indigenous knowledge depends.

Issues arise in documenting Indigenous knowledge, which is usually conveyed via a combination of oral and nonverbal methods, is often transmitted through longstanding and reciprocal relationships, is practical and experiential, and is highly contextualized in a way not easily captured by textual or photographic methods or in film or audio recordings. Erosion of significant portions of IK in communities stems from the death of knowledge holders (typically Elders), intellectual predation, language loss, alienation or destruction of traditional territory, legal prohibitions on traditional practices, and the decline in perceptions of its relevance among younger generations. Serious concerns thus surround perpetuating the intergenerational transmission of Indigenous knowledge, supporting its local

implementation, securing access to (if not repatriating) the lands in which it roots, nurturing the non-colonial languages with which it is articulated, and protecting IK from for-profit exploitation.

Indigenous knowledge is fundamentally local in a way not expressed by other paradigms. Because it is socially clustered and is generated through land-based experiences, it cannot be uprooted (from either its geographic place or its emplaced human agents) and carried to other locations and remain fully intact. It is this characteristic that makes discussions of Indigenous knowledge inseparable from questions of an Indigenous right to traditional territory. Attempts to codify and sever it from its human agents are similarly damaging, with gross misinterpretation and misrepresentation being the least pernicious effects of dislocation. Even measures intended to be protective of Indigenous knowledge can be erosive. There is, for example, an ongoing discussion of the nature and extent of change wrought by moving IK from the oral and nonverbal to the textual realm, which assails fundamental properties like fluidity, situational responsiveness, and variation across practitioners (the articulation between personal experience and taught or more formal understandings).

IK in Policymaking, Global Governance, and Research

The need to protect and perpetuate Indigenous knowledge for both its intrinsic and instrumental value has been recognized in many global governance instruments, both binding and nonbinding, including the *Convention on Biological Diversity*; the International Labour Organization's *Convention concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries (Convention 169)*; the "Rio Declaration" (aka *Agenda 21*); the United Nations' *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*; and the operating policies and "best practice" documents of the World Bank, World Intellectual Property Organization, and various United Nations bodies. Increasingly, Indigenous knowledge plays a role in policymaking and (sustainable) socioeconomic development, ostensibly to improve the quality

of life of Indigenous populations within nation states. In Canada, for example, the "traditional knowledge" of Indigenous communities is a necessary inclusion in land claim negotiations and comanagement agreements, as well as being incorporated into "resource management plans" for Indigenous territories. Moreover, individuals and organizations in many fields have pointed to IK's potential in developing solutions to modern problems from the domestic to the global level, calling for its use in scientific research, project planning, and policy development. These include specific applications in (agro)biodiversity, education, environmental rehabilitation, pharmaceuticals, and even intercultural dispute resolution.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Education, Traditional](#)
- ▶ [Indigenous Health Disparities](#)

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