

# **Ethical Guidelines for the Use of Traditional Knowledge in Research and Science**

*(Adapted from Traditional Knowledge Research Guidelines— Council of Yukon First Nations—<http://www.cyfn.ca/index.html>)*

Patricia Longley Cochran  
Executive Director, Alaska Native Science Commission  
426 L Street, Anchorage, AK 99501  
Tel. 907-258-2672; E-mail [pcochran@aknsc.org](mailto:pcochran@aknsc.org); Website <http://www.nativescience.org>

Over the past several years, the use of traditional knowledge as a legitimate component in the decision-making process has grown dramatically. This has prompted the need to establish guidelines for use of traditional knowledge to ensure that the people and the information are treated ethically and appropriately.

Guidelines are intended to provide overall instruction and direction for various key concerns regarding traditional knowledge for both researchers and Native communities. This guidance is intended to encourage the use of traditional knowledge and teaching practices by minimizing the potential for misuse and misunderstanding in the process.

## **AFN Board Adopts Policy Guidelines for Research**

The Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) conveys to all scientists and researchers who plan to conduct studies among Alaska Natives, that they must comply with the following research principles:

- Advise Native people who are to be affected by the study of the purpose, goals, and time frame of the research, the data-gathering techniques, the positive and negative implications, and impacts of the research.
- Obtain the informed consent of the appropriate governing body.
- Fund the support of a Native Research Committee appointed by the local community to assess and monitor the research project and ensure compliance with the expressed wishes of Native people.
- Protect the sacred knowledge and cultural/intellectual property of Native people.
- Hire and train Native people to assist in the study.
- Use Native language whenever English is the second language.
- Guarantee confidentiality of surveys and sensitive material.
- Include Native viewpoints in the final study.
- Acknowledge the contributions of Native resource people.
- Inform the Native Research Committee in a summary and in non-technical language of the major findings of the study.
- Provide copies of studies to the local library.

## **What Is Traditional Knowledge?**

- It is practical common sense based on teachings and experiences passed on from generation to generation.
- It is knowing the country. It covers knowledge of the environment—snow, ice,

- weather, resources—and the relationships between things.
- It is holistic. It cannot be compartmentalized and cannot be separated from the people who hold it. It is rooted in the spiritual health, culture, and language of the people. It is a way of life.
- Traditional knowledge is an authority system. It sets out the rules governing the use of resources—respect an obligation to share. It is dynamic, cumulative, and stable. It is truth.
- Traditional knowledge is a way of life—wisdom is using traditional knowledge in good ways. It is using the heart and the head together. It comes from the spirit in order to survive.
- It gives credibility to the people.

### **The Purpose for Traditional Knowledge Research Guidelines**

- To ensure that traditional knowledge is given the same weight as scientific knowledge, where appropriate.
- To help facilitate a positive working relationship that enhances or builds on respect, trust, and cooperation.
- It is important to recognize that traditional knowledge and scientific knowledge come from two different frameworks and that traditional knowledge cannot be arbitrarily inserted into any other framework.
- Traditional knowledge is a decision-making process used by Native people historically and still being used today. Information was passed on by means of songs, stories, and dance from one generation to another.

### **Principles of Traditional Knowledge Research**

- **Comprehensive:** Consider all current and planned initiatives involving traditional knowledge research.
- **Collaborative:** Advocate for effective partnerships in planning, implementation, and communication.
- **Equitable:** Recognize the need for balance in substantive weight between traditional knowledge and western science.
- **Culturally Sensitive:** Acknowledge the holistic nature of traditional knowledge within its spiritual and cultural context.
- **Capacity Building:** Provide a framework that nurtures community responsibility and accountability.

### **Access to Traditional Knowledge**

Seek permission to access traditional knowledge through the consent of the community. Such consent involves informing the affected community of the proposed project and being prepared to discuss the proposal, preferably with the community as a partner. Give adequate advance notice of the proposal to give time for addressing concerns or questions.

Access to traditional knowledge is a privilege given to researchers and therefore must be respected. A community-level process should be developed before there is any access to traditional knowledge. Interpretation is a key issue when giving traditional knowledge access to

a researcher. The researcher must ensure that the wisdom of Elders and traditional knowledge holders are properly conveyed.

***Researchers should consider:***

- With whom specifically to negotiate a research agreement.
- What specific research elements require negotiation (i.e., research, ownership, etc.).
- Communicate in clear layman's language the purpose of proposed research.
- How control can be enriched by a Community Research Committee.
- What exactly from the project will enhance community capacity.
- How confidential information will be protected.

***Communities should discuss:***

- Who specifically will negotiate on behalf of the community.
- What specific research elements require negotiation.
- Does the proposal address community research priorities.
- Mechanisms to deal with dispute resolution.
- What would constitute confidential information.

**Collection of Traditional Knowledge**

Each community should be responsible for guidelines at the community level. The process needs to respect the oral tradition, but the question remains: "how do we validate a type of knowledge without writing it down?" Additionally, there is a fear of loss in translation when writing down the information, because some components of language cannot be translated into another. Factors to consider:

- Communities should conduct the information collection at the community level.
- Traditional knowledge holders are experts in their areas and should be compensated accordingly.
- Sources of traditional knowledge information must be referenced in any work being conducted.
- The intent of the collection, as well as who will benefit, must be made clear.
- Researchers must contact the community before working with Elders or others in the community when proposing to do traditional knowledge work.
- Recognize that traditional knowledge is the sole property of the community (or group, clan, individual) from which it originates.
- Researchers shall show respect to the Elder or traditional knowledge holder at all times and respect their wishes if they determine that only portions of the information will be shared or can be used.
- Researchers are responsible for their research results, which must be brought back to the community in an understandable manner.
- Any benefits (including monetary) and credits deriving from this research must be shared equally with the community.

***Researchers should address:***

- The need for training community-based researchers.

- An adequate process for obtaining and maintaining informed choice.
- Appropriate ways of determining qualified holders of traditional knowledge.
- Equitable means of compensating project participants.
- Culturally-sensitive methods of interviewing traditional knowledge holders.
- How respect for traditional knowledge holders and traditional knowledge in general can be demonstrated.

***Community should clarify:***

- Criteria for selecting community-based researchers.
- Ways of ensuring maintenance of community support for the project.
- Appropriate ways of determining qualified traditional knowledge holders.
- Acceptable options for compensating project participants.
- Culturally sensitive methods of approaching traditional knowledge holders.
- How respect for traditional knowledge holders and traditional knowledge in general can be demonstrated.

**Use of Traditional Knowledge**

Certain aspects of traditional knowledge are recognized as sacred and this must be respected—for example, traditional medicine, or the knowledge of it, must be used only with the assistance of a recognized traditional knowledge practitioner. Some traditional knowledge cannot be shared. Procedures to follow:

- Researchers shall ask permission from the community for the use of their traditional knowledge.
- All information gathered shall be given to that community and shall be the property of that community.
- Research results shall be communicated back to the community.
- All information gathered shall be properly noted and credit given to the holder of the traditional knowledge and the community from which it came.
- Communities or individuals working with researchers should be given the opportunity to continue to work in the development of projects rather than simply having their knowledge harvested and used at the researchers' discretion.
- The community shall have the right to review and inspect the process at any stage and order the process be stopped if the project is in violation of any terms or conditions attached to the research work.
- If a stop work order is issued, the information gathered is to be turned over to the community.

***Researchers should assess:***

- Innovative ways of incorporating principles of traditional knowledge into science-based research activities.
- Information on conventional locations of research holdings.
- Adequate forms of legal protection for sensitive information.
- Granting due credit to project contributions.
- Method of requesting permission to use research results in other forums (i.e., academic

conferences).

***Communities should deliberate:***

- Ways of encouraging compliance with regulations that require the incorporation of traditional knowledge into developmental baseline research agendas.
- Mechanisms for monitoring potential abuse of confidential information.
- Suitable forms of legal protection for sensitive information.
- Local authorities for the granting permission to use research results.
- Designing ways to measure adequate consideration of traditional knowledge .

**Storage of Traditional Knowledge**

- How communities might access and use research results.
- How to deal with the question of language in writing the report for the community.
- Typical formats of documentation (audio tape, video, digital, hardcopy) that recognize community limits.
- Primary sources of traditional knowledge information are the holders of traditional knowledge.
- Secondary sources of traditional knowledge are in the literature, museums, libraries, etc.

***Communities could examine:***

- What local capacity exists to hold research results and/or artifacts.
- Whether to request an authorized qualified agency or organization to retain research results and/or artifacts.
- Opportunities to carry out an inventory of existing traditional knowledge holdings.
- Ways of establishing and augmenting local capacity for traditional knowledge archives.
- Financial implications for storing traditional knowledge research results.

**Code of Research Ethics/Protocols**

Traditional Knowledge is a living knowledge—living within the elders—and we have to be very careful in our approach to accessing and recording it. There is a danger in writing it down and recording and storing it. The responsibility remains with us to pass that knowledge safely on to our younger people. It's fine to store and keep it in a safe place, but the safest place we can keep it is in our minds and in our hearts.

**END**