

# **The Centre for Indigenous Peoples' Nutrition and Environment at McGill University, Montreal, Canada: A Unique Partnership Model**

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The Centre for Indigenous Peoples' Nutrition and Environment (CINE) was established at McGill University in Montreal in 1993 in response to a need expressed by Aboriginal peoples in Canada for participatory research and education to address their concerns about the integrity of their traditional food systems. Canadian Aboriginal leaders worked together to lobby for funds for the Centre and to establish a working structure for CINE's activities. Discussions about establishing the Centre began in 1988, following successful work on traditional food systems in Bella Coola, British Columbia, and the Canadian Arctic towns of Broughton Island, Fort Good Hope, and Colville Lake.

Initial funding for the Centre came through the Arctic Environmental Strategy, managed by Canada's Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND), as an initiative of Canada's *Green Plan*. Staff recruitment and preparation of physical space with building renovation at McGill University began in March 1992, and CINE officially opened in autumn 1993. The CINE Governing Board includes representatives from the Assembly of First Nations, Council of Yukon First Nations, Dene Nation, Inuit Circumpolar Conference, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, Metis Nation of the Northwest Territories, and the Mohawk Council of Kahnawake. As the Aboriginal community geographically closest to the University, the Mohawk Council of Kahnawake serves as CINE's host. It seems to be inevitable that our work in indigenous communities involves political issues, and it is the members of our Governing Board who manage these aspects. The current Chair of the CINE Governing Board is Chief Bill Erasmus of the Assembly of First Nations in Canada.

The logo for our Centre gives a quick visual capsule of what we are. Its lovely design was developed by a Mohawk artist, Kim Delormier. It represents traditional animal foods from the sky, the land, the waters, and plant foods. We work throughout the world, represented by the four directions, but we have our initial and a continuing focus in the North. We also work within the four quadrants of health recognized in aboriginal tradition: (1) emotional, (2) spiritual, (3) physical, and (4) mental. Food, especially traditional food, within cultures is important in all of these areas.

CINE is a permanent multidisciplinary research and education resource with an international outlook. The forces of environmental and cultural change that have an impact on traditional food systems, nutrition, and health of Indigenous Peoples have global similarities and significance. The Centre operates at arm's length from government and works closely with Indigenous Peoples' communities on topics related to their traditional food systems.

CINE's governance is conducted by the CINE Governing Board, noted above, for activities related to indigenous communities. A Dean's Advisory Board contributes to matters related to the University. All professors based at CINE are appointed by the University, receive salary through the academic structure, and maintain academic freedom.

An important part of CINE's activities has been development of methodology to assess benefits and risks of using traditional food. Our staff recruitment resulted in hiring professors with skills in toxicology, epidemiology, ethnobotany and nutrition—all of whom work both nationally within Canada and internationally. We have a fine cohort of research assistants and students who contribute to our success.

A hallmark of CINE's work—one for which CINE is seen as a model internationally—has been good participatory techniques for activities conducted with communities. We depend on three levels of consent with Indigenous Peoples:

- collective consent from the Aboriginal Organization representing all communities within the culture;
- community consent in the form of a research agreement; and
- individual informed consent.

All community-based activities include agreement on the conduct of projects, local staff training and involvement, and return of results to communities before final reports are submitted. A recent publication on participatory health research refers to good techniques followed during CINE dietary studies (Sims and Kuhnlein, 2003, available at <http://www.cine.mcgill.ca>).

It is well established internationally that when traditional lifestyles of Indigenous Peoples give way to modern ways of living and industrial-based diets, chronic diseases increase. This is often signaled by population indicators of diets high in commercial fats and simple carbohydrates, reduced physical activity, and increased obesity. Understanding patterns of food use by Indigenous Peoples has several potential benefits, including knowing the extent of contaminant exposure, knowing the extent of nutritional quality of the diet and specific food sources of nutrients and contaminants, and knowing what food items can be deleted or added to improve diet quality. Our research on diet emphasizes the dichotomy of traditional food and market/store-purchased food (see for example Kuhnlein et al., *J. Nutr.* 124:1447–53, 2004).

This year we have been active in developing a series of case studies to document traditional food systems and to recognize their potential for health promotion within communities. Working with support from Canadian funding sources, and under the rubric of the International Union of Nutritional Sciences (IUNS), the intent is to provide evidence that traditional food systems are important for the health of Indigenous Peoples, and therefore should be protected with international policies. Documentation supporting our proposals is provided by WHO, FAO, IPGRI, and the IUNS.

We invite you to visit our website at [www.cine.mcgill.ca](http://www.cine.mcgill.ca), and to drop in for a personal visit at our home base on the Macdonald Campus of McGill University, located on the western tip of the island of Montreal.

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