15 Seven Indigenous principles for successful cooperation in Great Lakes conservation initiatives

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Introduction

Academics, governmental and nongovernmental environmental managers, as well as policymakers, often seek practical guidance principles and specific strategies to improve partnerships with Indigenous peoples focused on conservation, ecological restoration, and environmental protection in the Great Lakes region. To develop such principles and strategies, we draw from our study, in which more than 40 representatives from Indigenous-led or -influenced partnerships in the Great Lakes Basin provided diverse ideas about the range of principles that support successful Indigenous participation.

This chapter is based on the largest study to date (Reo et al., 2017) that collectively develops and analyzes case examples of partnerships led or deeply influenced by Indigenous partners. These partnerships focused on outcomes tied to conservation, ecological restoration, and environmental protection in the region. This chapter builds on Indigenous persons' experiences at the ground level of designing partnerships who communicated key principles that made for success or failure in such endeavors. It is an informed exercise in considering the ethics of cooperation in Great Lakes conservation.

We present a practical set of principles for successful partnerships that originated in these projects as expanded through further interpretation based on the author team's collective experiences. We offer informed insights and strategies that those interested in cooperation should consider in their actual or potential partnerships with Indigenous peoples.

Research question

Is there a set of principles to help guide environmental partnerships in the Great Lakes region between Indigenous peoples and national governmental, academic, and nonprofit organizations?

Method

This analysis arises from two research processes. First, during 2012–2014, we interviewed more than 40 participants in multiparty partnerships in the Great Lakes region, which included several hundred Tribes and First Nations, and major Indigenous multiparty organizations such as the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission and the Chiefs of Ontario. Interviewees represented a cross-case analysis of 39 partnerships involving Tribes and First Nations. The Upper-Midwest Landscape Conservation Cooperative (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) funded the project. We looked at partnerships either initiated by Indigenous peoples or in which Indigenous peoples significantly influenced the partnership's organizational structure and practices. Based on an analysis of these examples and focus groups with Indigenous practitioners and their close partners, we developed seven key principles to help cooperative institutions create robust and lasting partnerships. Second, we gathered a group of authors, most with backgrounds in Indigenous conservation, but also from areas as diverse as environmental ethics and history, to interpret the data relevant to guiding principles for collaboration. While protecting the confidentiality of interviewees and discussants, we provide practical distillations of the more philosophically articulated principles.

Findings

Principles are general ideas that help direct planning, policymaking, and interpersonal behavior, subject to adaptation for specific contexts. The principles outlined here are “well-tested” in the sense that the interviewees and authors understood them as having been used effectively—that is, they helped achieve a party's desired goals—in multiple political, cultural, and environmental contexts.

A strategy is an adaptation of a principle for a specific context that seeks to fulfill the spirit of the principle. These participants articulated strategies for enacting the seven principles. Academics, managers, and policymakers should see these principles and strategies as provisional conversation starters for establishing future partnerships and evaluating ongoing partnerships.

Principle of self-determination

This principle concerns Indigenous peoples' right to self-determination. They have this right by virtue of exercising their own governing systems prior to U.S., Canadian, and European colonialism. This right is also enshrined in U.S. laws and policies, such as the government-to-government relationship, and in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Some Indigenous peoples prefer terms such as “sovereignty” or “autonomy” to express self-determination. That preference may be for philosophical reasons or for reasons tied to what linguistic conventions are deemed suitable in certain legal contexts.

Respect for self-determination includes a set of important meanings that vary by social, geographic, and political context. For most Indigenous peoples, realizing self-determination means that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous governments mutually agree on terms for shared jurisdiction over lands, waters, and resources. Self-determination can mean non-Indigenous parties acknowledge and are bound by formal laws and policies that reference and secure their collective self-governance, as in the case of a treaty or statute. It can also mean ensuring that Indigenous partners are treated as not only citizens, interest groups, or stakeholders of the U.S. or Canada, but also as representatives of self-governing nations in their own right. Indigenous peoples seldom seek full incorporation into the nation-state; at the same time, they rarely only citizens, interest groups, or stakeholders of the U.S. or Canada, but also as representatives of self-governing nations in their own right. Indigenous peoples seldom seek full incorporation into the nation-state; at the same time, they rarely seek complete independence or secession (Hendrix, 2008; Napoleon, 2005).

In some cases, self-determination emphasizes cultural difference in that all forms of political or legal order are culturally embedded. That is, self-determination can refer to customary laws and culturally embedded legal orders that guide governance, economic, and social systems (Borrows, 2002). Gender, for example, is important. Indigenous peoples often have different gender systems than settler societies, with implications for how Indigenous leadership is organized.

Given the connections between leadership and gender, many Indigenous peoples interpret discriminatory norms such as sexism as attacks on self-determination and nationhood (Deer, 2015; Goeman and Denetdale, 2009; Whyte, 2016). Indigenous legal orders may ascribe moral concepts to nonhuman entities or beings that do not make sense within the moral frameworks of settler societies, such as viewing “water” as having personhood, moral responsibilities, or rights (McGregor, 2005). The notion of “respecting self-determination” honors the integrity of Indigenous ways of life that may differ from those of non-Indigenous citizens of a broader, national society. Understandings of self-determination under cultural or customary law ought not be used to sidestep formal treaties or laws protecting Indigenous self-determination. It is nonetheless important to be aware of cases in which the language or terms of treaties or laws was not consensually accepted by the Indigenous parties, hence betraying cultural or customary law in certain respects.

Finally, self-determination sometimes refers to the governmental capacities of specific Indigenous peoples. That is, they should have the bureaucratic/administrative, scientific, legal, and diplomatic capacities to participate equally with state/provincial, federal, and nongovernmental organizations in consultations, jointplanning, negotiations, and other cooperative or adversarial processes. In the United States, for example, Indigenous peoples often press the federal government to ensure their fair or equal access to administrative and programming funds in relation to U.S. states.

**Strategies for enacting the principle of self-determination**

Non-Indigenous partners should respect self-determination as a governmental, jurisdictional authority. Such respect may extend to regions where Indigenous peoples have historic ties, on lands where they retain treaty-guaranteed resource rights, on lands that were never formally ceded to settler governments (now generally called state and federal governments), or in territories to which they migrated, whether voluntarily or by force. A memorandum of understanding or other formal document should be created to acknowledge their division of authority and responsibility. The advisory, steering, and leadership committees or boards of multiparty institutions should include Indigenous members as representatives of self-determining peoples. In one case, an Indigenous multiparty organization, Anishinabek Nation, created a Women’s Water Commission to increase the influence of Indigenous women’s leadership roles in water governance in Ontario (McGregor, 2012). Some commission participants are leaders in movements and organizations that exercise self-determination outside of formally recognized Indigenous governments.

Many Indigenous persons saw this representation as an expression of far older forms of governance, stewardship and laws. First Nations have created expressions of their legal orders, such as Chiefs of Ontario’s Water Declaration of the Anishinabek, Mushkegowuk, and Onkwehonwe (2008). In partnerships, these expressions propose concepts, protocols, moral codes, traditions, and knowledge that should weigh equally with U.S. or Canadian legal orders. Multiparty institutions should consult with Indigenous groups on issues affecting traditional territory, treaty territory, or title territory. Governmental and nongovernmental organizations owe a duty to inform Indigenous peoples of their plans and actions without Indigenous groups having to inquire to learn about these efforts.

**Principle of early involvement**

Indigenous peoples should have opportunities to consent or to be consulted early in any process that affects their interests. “Early involvement” or “free, prior, and informed consent” are found in U.S. and Canadian laws and policies and in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Yet “early” or “prior” can be interpreted many ways. Indigenous representatives should be invited to participate when any partnership is established – “at conception” – to help determine the basic form and operation of the institutional structures. This differs from assumptions that consider it acceptable to reach out only after an institution’s or program’s specific vision or organizational structure have been outlined by the initial partners, often government agencies or nongovernmental organizations.

Early involvement also respects the legacy that Indigenous peoples historically were not consulted or allowed to say “no” to U.S. or Canadian settlement projects and business interests, including extractive industries and the military. Indigenous peoples’ memories, both direct and historical, recall these events as acts of physical violence against them (Deer, 2015; Whyte, 2017a) with wide-ranging ramifications for environmental justice issues such as reproductive justice (Hoover et al., 2012), ceremonial and cultural practices (LaDuke, 1999), and land-use planning that supports flourishing economies and societies (Treaty Indian Tribes in Western Washington, 2011; Walker et al., 2013).
Strategies for enacting the principle of early involvement

Early involvement is best practised through initial meetings where participants discuss their interests in a broadly conceived topic such as “wetlands” or “fishing.” After establishing their relevant histories and interests, participants can move into more specific conversations about their capacities to work together. The locations, space, and procedures of initial meetings carry symbolic importance that may affect development of the ensuing institution. It is prudent to recognize this symbolic importance, and Indigenous partners should have the opportunity to host meetings, particularly early in the collaboration. Indigenous peoples often discuss the importance of non-Indigenous parties connecting in person on Indigenous territories to encourage more place-based learning. Early involvement should involve formal expression, such as drafting or documentation of the partnership to ensure that all participants are satisfied with the structure and vision.

These considerations apply to research-oriented partnerships, too. Indigenous partners should participate in planning what kind of research will be performed, how it will be disseminated, and how Indigenous peoples will be involved in interpretation of the data (Smith, 1999).

Principle of intergenerational involvement

Involving all age groups in the cultural dimensions of partnerships is congruent with cultural values in many Indigenous contexts. Indigenous peoples often expect partnerships to bring together different age groups in their community to work meaningfully together and with non-Indigenous collaborators. Partnerships should aspire to involve young people at multiple levels, including but not limited to fieldwork and formal and informal project meetings. Some communities have growing young populations with half or more under 18. Involving youth helps ensure the long-term viability of such efforts. One key consideration involves determining the generations of participants (youth, middle-aged, and elder community members).

The term “youth” is defined broadly to include primary school students through college age and young professionals (generally 25 and under). Prioritizing youth involvement respects the traditional importance of intergenerational relationships. Involvement in these partnerships can help youth learn or reinforce cultural practices and traditional values, can help them develop an appreciation for science, and can help them feel that outsiders respect their cultures. It also motivates, educates, and trains young people to learn about and become good stewards of their environment. Partnerships benefit from the wisdom and insights of a younger generation and from their enthusiasm, optimism, and technical skillsets.

Other segments of the population must also play important roles in many facets of a partnership, especially elders, as well as parents, aunts, uncles, and others. Elders, for example, are respected for their experience-based guidance and wisdom in many Indigenous communities. From the perspectives of some Indigenous peoples, partnerships are an opportunity to involve elders in meaningful work.

Strategies for enacting the principle of intergenerational involvement

Younger community members will benefit from engaging in culturally and career-relevant experiences such as event planning, fieldwork, and problem-solving in team environments. Internships provide valuable experiences and substantively contributed to several partnerships. For example, in one case, interns worked alongside a team of scientists and elders who were comparing knowledge on water quality issues affecting an important plant. The youth talked to and interfaced with the elders, building relationships with their community; at the same time, the youth worked with scientists, learning scientific methods for water testing. The youth participated in presenting at conferences both on the water-related findings but also in presentations about weaving together the different knowledge systems. Young people should be encouraged to participate in research and other components of partnerships that have natural linkages to their secondary and postsecondary programs of study.

Youth are also an important target audience for educational and outreach activities created by partnerships. It is important to develop educational materials suited for students at different levels and to have partnership representatives speak to youth audiences inside and outside of schools. Young people can also produce powerful testimonies about the importance of the partnership. Elders should be involved in the decision-making, guidance, and visioning processes of a partnership, whether directly or through an advisory committee.

Many partnerships involved specific roles for linking elders with scientists in performing scientific and technical work, from the design of research to the interpretation of results. In one example, a project to restore an animal population formed a special scientific committee led by several elders who not only played a role in setting the tone and agenda for the meetings but also worked with tribal and nontribal scientists to figure out the best way to do research needed for the restoration work.

Principle of continuous cross-cultural education

Partnership requires that participants have sufficient education and sensitivity about one another’s cultural traditions, histories, values, priorities, and aspirations. Yet it may be unclear what the most appropriate mechanisms for cross-cultural learning are—or what defines an adequate suite of competencies or level of understanding for engagement with Indigenous peoples. Non-Indigenous partners, including those working for Indigenous governments, are often unfamiliar with the values or do not fully understand the perspectives of Indigenous peoples. For example, many Indigenous peoples are motivated by culturally specific and long-standing – even ancient – responsibilities to care for the land, water, plant and animal populations, and fellow members of one’s human community (Bang...
Several partnerships we studied used pipe ceremonies, traditional songs, or convocations by elders to begin meetings or before initiating significant stewardship actions. The Little River Band of Ottawa Indians is well-known for its sturgeon ceremony, a public ceremony designed when the tribe worked with partners to revive sturgeon populations. Both partners and the public come to the afternoon-long ceremony. All attendees participate in cultural activities, such as Indigenous protocols and relationships to sturgeon. At the end of the ceremony, each participant can release a small sturgeon into the river to begin its new life (Holtgren, 2013).

**Principle of balance of power and decision-making**

Multiparty governance involves many partners who remain formally independent. While this principle may seem obvious, it is important nonetheless, given that Indigenous peoples are sometimes tokenized in partnerships or assumed to lack decision-making authority. Models and structures of decision-making must account for different ways that parties make decisions. Western strategies of decision-making, whether via majority voting or delegation to a committee of experts, may not work for some Indigenous peoples if these strategies are privileged or dominating. Different cultures have different methods for negotiation, conflict resolution, and decision-making (Story and Lickers, 1997).

These methods should be on the table as a partnership is planned. Equal representation alone does not determine the balance of power in a partnership. Individual personalities, decision-making structures, political power, legal rights, and cultural perspectives can all influence the balance of power and group dynamics. Particular personalities or biases (e.g., about the value of different forms of knowledge) can shift the balance of power or dominate discussions. And one or two insensitive or inflexible personalities can ruin a whole initiative.

**Strategies for enacting the principle of balance of power and decision-making**

Interpersonal relationships must be developed so it is possible to discuss important decisions, including respectful criticism of alternative views. An emphasis on discussion to reach consensus develops relationships among decision-makers and creates understanding. Sometimes ongoing discussions can lead to new relationships, a substantial gain in contexts where Indigenous peoples have not previously worked well with national governments and other partners.

Indigenous peoples may have skills for decision-making that are particularly appropriate in multiparty governance contexts. In one case in Wisconsin, an Indigenous people had a long-standing tradition of “outreach” and “engagement” that their non-Indigenous partners learned from, especially since their approach differed from non-Indigenous approaches that are often assumed to be the only valid ones. In other cases, Indigenous peoples had specific methods of consensus decision-making that were well-suited to their initiative. Haudenosaunee

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*Strategies for enacting the principle of continuous cross-cultural education*

Ongoing cultural liaisons or translators can benefit cross-cultural education. For instance, community members with academic training in Western science or staff with extensive experience bridging Indigenous and non-Indigenous institutions can help avert or resolve conflicts over misunderstandings and cultural differences. But these roles cannot be on top of the work-related responsibilities they already have. That is unfair to those individuals and their communities and nations. Communities themselves should determine who plays such roles. Their traditions, including ceremonies, can be important in partnership meetings and fieldwork and should not be hidden or omitted simply because of a diversity of cultural backgrounds in the group.

The presence of cultural traditions may play an integral part of cooperative group interactions. Ceremonies and other cultural practices lead to cross-cultural conversations, which are perhaps the most important part of this educational process. Non-Indigenous participants learn about Indigenous partners' values and cultural understandings via active participation. Including cultural practices also respectfully informs people outside the partnership that Indigenous peoples are central partners. Indigenous peoples should have space and respect within a partnership to express interest in taking the lead in developing these ideas and practices for cross-cultural learning.
Strategies for enacting the principle of respect for Indigenous knowledges

Indigenous partners must recognize the legitimacy of Indigenous knowledge and respect its potential to influence project priorities and outcomes as equal to their own scientific methods. This is not to say that any source of Indigenous knowledge should be uncritically accepted. Indigenous knowledge can be respectfully scrutinized, and validation is appropriate in some instances, just as scientific concepts and data are scrutinized to ensure validity. In some cases, partners should respect concerns about privacy that may arise when validation requires a community to reveal the location of a sacred place (Williams and Hardison, 2013). Partnerships should begin by respecting prima facie Indigenous knowledge and scientific knowledge as equally valid sources of information, insight, and wisdom (Kimmerer, 1998; Whyte, 2013).

The importance of Indigenous knowledges is not confined to their relevance as an additional source of data or evidence in scientific research (Houde, 2007; Lakulippe, 2015a, 2015b). While historic and ongoing local observations by Indigenous knowledge-keepers can be valuable, Indigenous knowledges also shape the priorities of a project and bring cultural practices into meetings, research protocols, and decision-making. These knowledge-keepers provide valuable expertise in framing research questions and hypotheses and in providing contextual interpretations of project results. Indigenous partners' communal values will influence their conservation priorities and research ethics (e.g., appropriate ways to handle biological specimens). These are all valid forms of Indigenous knowledge that could be beneficial in the context of partnerships. Given the diversity of Indigenous knowledges, their partners should prepare to interact with diverse knowledge-keepers, as in the case of gender diversity. They should also be open to the possibility that some knowledges filter into the partnership via community members or staff who themselves are not Indigenous knowledge-keepers that is, cultural translators determined by Indigenous communities and nations.

Principle of control of knowledge mobilization

Partnerships addressing landscape-scale environmental issues involve many types and layers of information, knowledge, and research. Knowledge mobilization is the process of bringing together these elements for planning, policy formation, and making decisions. While all partners may have an interest in producing information, sharing knowledge and engaging in cooperative research, they hold different assumptions about how to implement such goals (Smith, 1999; Walker et al., 2013; Whyte, 2016, 2017b). Indigenous peoples are often embroiled in political conflicts over issues such as harvesting rights that require them to disclose reliable information to protect their rights and self-determination. In certain contexts, scientific research can be offensive or threatening to their cultures. Some scientific studies require interactions with species that violate Indigenous ethical standards of conduct for human–animal relations, such as concerns that tracking or monitoring technologies are not ethical ways to interact with certain animals or fish (Williams and Hardison, 2013).

Threats and offense are possible because of differing expectations and concerns about who should generate the data and whether all information resulting from or shared during the project should be publicly available. Community members may feel that their knowledge is being mined for purposes other than their own or
that their knowledge will be used against them in development of policies or legislation that does not benefit Indigenous peoples (Dalton, 2010; TallBear, 2013). It is important to think of ways that research can bring value to community initiatives, such as public presentations about community-related issues, developing materials for use in local schools, or shaping the research to provide evidence for projects that Indigenous peoples want to undertake or evaluate.

**Strategies for enacting the principle of control of knowledge mobilization**

In some instances, it is important for Indigenous peoples to oversee data collection and analysis. Their control legitimizes both the data and the research process in the eyes of the community members they serve. In resource conflicts, Indigenous harvesters often do not trust data generated by states or provinces. In such instances, an Indigenous organization may take on the responsibility of collecting data using both Indigenous and scientific methodologies. In other cases, Indigenous partners may prefer non-Indigenous groups to take charge of data collection. A partnership may wish to give the Indigenous partner resources to develop a research protocol or memorandum of understanding to ensure the community’s say in how data are collected and stored, particularly involving traditional knowledge.

These protocols may differ significantly from university institutional review boards (Williams and Hardison, 2013). Some peoples have privacy standards concerning specific types of data or information that are stricter than those of scientists with whom they work. Both Indigenous peoples and institutions such as universities have developed contract language and appendices that express protections of knowledge associated with Indigenous standards of, or concerns about, privacy. Finally, Indigenous organizations can conduct scientific and technical work in ways that support indigenous cultures and self-determination. Although scientific methodologies and technical work may not have been created for the purposes of Indigenous cultures or self-determination, there is no reason why they cannot be redeployed to suit these ends.

**Discussion**

The principles articulated in this chapter arise from experiences in partnerships led or influenced by Indigenous peoples. While experiences are diverse, many of these principles stem from the value Indigenous peoples ascribe to the ecosystems of their territories in the Great Lakes region. Throughout this project, elders and many others expressed the significance of political, cultural, historical, social, and educational relationships to their territories. While each Indigenous people has a different history of relocation and territorial dispossession, partners should not diminish or downplay the importance of territory for being able to exercise self-determination, practice knowledge systems, and perform ceremonies and social activities. Partners must try to reflect on how to play a part in the work Indigenous peoples do on behalf of Indigenous territories rather than thinking only about how Indigenous peoples can support the goals of non-Indigenous partners.

These principles are not meant to be unwavering rules and are not articulated as such. Rather, they are key heuristics or rough guidelines that should be observed diligently in forming conservation partnerships. While they may be articulated “roughly” here, that does not mean there are no serious consequences and harms associated with failure to observe them. Disrespecting self-determination or violating privacy can set back the potential for present or future collaboration by decades. On the other hand, taking these principles seriously promises a strong possibility of well-founded relationships that move toward higher levels of trustworthiness and mutual respect.

**References**


**Part V**

**Conclusions**