

Project A1257: ISI WIPAN – Climate: Identifying the impacts of climate change and capacity for adaptation in two Saskatchewan First Nations communities

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Two community case studies were undertaken with attention given to the integrated and interconnected impacts of climate change across various sectors. A holistic framework was used that emphasizes the interconnections between the social, cultural and natural systems. The purpose of the research is assess the future impacts of climate change and the capacity for two First Nation communities in Saskatchewan to respond and adapt to those impacts. Smither and Smit (2000) state that “the standard approach is rarely connected to current experience of communities and usually does not relate to the actual adaptive decision making process in communities.”

Both communities of James Smith and Shoal Lake are situated in the southern boreal forest and historically depended on the regional ecological community of plants and animals for their economic and survival needs. Through the discussions in the focus groups, the Elders continually spoke of the connections between the natural environment and their social, physical and spiritual well being. Their interaction with the land moulded their traditional environmental knowledge and their social norms that create and maintain healthy communities. The boreal forest, with its lakes, creeks, topography, along with its flora and fauna, provided the array of health needs such as natural foods and water, medicinal plants, aesthetics and spiritual grounding. It is true that the land gave life to the people.

The Elders of James Smith and Shoal Lake said that the ancestors had forewarned their people about the unfolding of environmental and socio-cultural changes. On the environmental front, analysis of the Elders’ statements indicates that similar climatic events had happened to both communities. Both communities experienced alternative periods of flood and drought outside the variation considered normal in their territories. The Elders, however, were not unfamiliar with climatic variations and trusted that the flux was an expression of natural patterns and events that the people had to synchronize with. Community systems remained fixed and people unchanged in the face of these historic climatic disturbances. This tenacity to psychologically accept and prepare for climatic fluctuations contributes to and demonstrates socio-cultural stability over the course of their history.

The communities were also impacted by human induced changes to the environment. The communities were more vulnerable to these changes and were indeed culturally harmed by these practices because of their cultural and historic ties to the land. The impact of Industrial activities in their territories was seen as major perturbations that impacted their communities by disrupting balanced connections to the land and its flora and fauna. The loss of pristine forests presaged shifts of consciousness and changing lifestyles. On the socio-cultural level, both communities started experiencing changes in climate and in people around the 1960’s. The communities started shifting away from traditional modes of cohesion with the gradual adoption of non-traditional lifestyles that

made them susceptible to the erosion of traditional environmental knowledge. The increased adoption of non-traditional lifestyles such as farming, waged labour and increased dependency on outside sources of assistance undermined the communities' established social networks such as the cultural continuity from the old to the young. It is inevitable that the communities would adopt contemporary modes of living to replace the more traditional subsistence patterns such as hunting and trapping. Indeed, the people adapted to modern conveniences such as vehicles, processed foods and all the luxuries of modern housing. This process of material and cultural adaptation is the unseen and unspoken background to the philosophical and psychological dimensions of change discussed by the Elders.

The Elders from James Smith and Shoal Lake speak of strong philosophies and attitudes that had certainly helped to maintain their communities' equilibrium in the past. Personal reflection for knowledge development and a spirit of cooperation contributed to strong and flexible communities. On the personal level, the cultural promotion of traditional knowledge creates aware individuals and at the collective level, social responsibility promoted communal unity. The systemic philosophies and attitudes of the communities allowed them degrees of manoeuvrability as they negotiated changes taking place around them. The Elders from both communities believe that their people have also shown inherent resilience in light of the changes they have experienced in their histories. Both communities have largely recuperated from the impacts experienced from perturbations such as climatic fluctuations and loss of traditional forests. The Elders believe that psychological development is a prime factor for people to adapt to changing environments. The Elders also spoke of what enables their people to adapt to future events. Developing foresight through traditional means of knowing enhances the capacity to predict how nature will ultimately unfold. This capacity to anticipate future scenarios has the potential to help communities to plan for climate change and its potential impacts.

Overall, the Elders identify issues that constrain their communities' abilities to plan for and adapt to climate change. The James Smith Cree recognize their complicity in the causes of climate change by their adoption of contemporary lifestyles. Cultural continuity in both communities is a concern and Elders place strong emphasis that such continuity is vital for the future of their youth. Both communities also experienced increases in diabetes and other forms of ill health, which they attribute to the shift of diets from natural foods to contemporary forms of processed foods. What community decisions are made regarding the youth will determine the future capacity of both James Smith and Shoal Lake to negotiate the future of climate change. At this juncture, there is urgent need to link Elders with the youth as a way to ensure that cultural knowledge is transmitted. They recognize that traditional environmental knowledge and survival philosophies are default skills people will require in the event of modern crisis.