Journal of Extension
www.joe.org

October 2010
Volume 48 Number 5
Article Number 5FEA9

Return to Current Issue

We Listen to Them: Assessing Natural Resource Perspectives and Priorities in a Tribal Community

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Abstract: We sought to begin a natural resource-based partnership with a Minnesota Tribe, but gaining clear insights into environmental perspectives can be difficult for outsiders, and methods typically used are often ineffective or inappropriate. We introduce the Extension community to a method for assessment of Tribal community context, perspectives, and priorities. We present the method in the context of an emerging collaboration between the University of Minnesota Extension and the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa. Finally, we summarize key lessons that emerged, namely, that disconnect, identified at multiple scales, frames the community's natural resource perspectives and priorities.

Introduction

In a 2005 *JOE* article, Hiller (2005) suggested that, while there are 562 tribes and 314 federally recognized reservations in the United States, there has been limited interaction between Extension and Tribes. In short, he asserted that, "Extension is not reaching Indian Country" (Hiller, 2005: p.1). Five years have passed since those comments, and, while new and important work has been documented in *JOE* (Emm & Breazeale, 2008; Hart, 2006), few examples have emerged of engagement that recognize or reflect Tribal context(s).

Thus, this article serves two purposes. First, it introduces to the Extension community a time-tested method for assessment of community context, perspectives, and priorities. We present the method in the context of an emerging collaboration between the University of Minnesota (UMN) Extension and the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa (FDL). Second, this article summarizes preliminary results from the use of this method as an initial step in the nascent UMN-FDL collaboration.

By initiating the FDL collaboration with a time-tested method adapted from international development, we learned early on that disconnect, identified at multiple scales, frames the community's natural resource

perspectives and priorities. So while our objective is to catalyze natural resource education and to affect associated behavior, we have discovered that our approach must be one that facilitates establishment and/or strengthening of connections.

Context

As elsewhere, UMN Extension does not have a rich history of working with the state's tribes. Nevertheless, important examples of collaboration exist. As early as the 1950s, health and nutrition programming was occurring with the Red Lake Reservation. These and other efforts led to more targeted programs, such as the White Earth Math and Science Academy (Blinn, Zak, & Vogt, 2006).

In 2006, UMN Extension created an American Indian Task Force to learn how Extension could better serve the Native community. In 2007, UMN Extension created the position of American Indian Liaison. Subsequently, two educator positions in Youth Development were funded and filled. Two positions in Natural Resources followed, funded through university support and a Federally Recognized Tribal Extension Program (FRTEP) grant.

One of the natural resource positions focuses on the Fond du Lac (FDL) Reservation, located in northeastern Minnesota (Figure 1), adjacent to the city of Cloquet (pop. 11,479; USCB, 2000) and approximately 20 miles west of Duluth (pop. 84,167; USCB, 2000). Established by the La Pointe Treaty of 1854, the 101,426-acre Reservation is one of six member reservations of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe.

Figure 1.
Location of the Fond du Lac Reservation Within Minnesota

Initial goals for the natural resource educator working with FDL emerged from conversations between Extension and the Band's Resource Management Division (RMD). One goal was to create an introductory experience for the educator to catalyze work with FDL Band members and the surrounding community. Proper introductory experiences are paramount because relationships are important in Native communities, and outside researchers, or educators, should be introduced by community members (Deloria, 1991).

Another initial goal was to enrich understanding of community and cultural perspectives on natural resources and resource management. FDL's Integrated Resource Management Plan (IRMP; FDL, 2008) incorporated community input via focus groups, but lacked the perspectives of Band members who do not typically

self-select for participation. Our initial challenge was to find an approach that met both these needs. We also foresaw the potential, if not certain need, to adapt conventional methods used in Extension to better reach our traditional audience (Bowling & Brahm, 2002).

Method

Gaining clear insights into the environmental perspectives of ethnic and minority communities is often difficult for outsiders (Bengston, 2004). Methods used to glean information about attitudes and values of the dominant culture are often ineffective, or inappropriate, when used in racial and ethnic communities (Bowling & Brahm, 2002; McAvoy, Winter, Outley, McDonald, & Chavez, 2000; Alves, 1993). Moreover, comprehensive surveys of reservation households (e.g., Emm & Breazeale, 2008) are not always practical or feasible for reasons of limited access, trust, goodwill, or other material resources.

A number of recommended practices for engaging communities have emerged in research literature addressing Native American communities, as well as in literature from international conservation and development, which very often involves indigenous communities. First, engagement should be *participatory*. Participatory methods best align with traditional means of communication (Conti, 1997). Appreciative Inquiry, for example, is one participatory method that has received attention by Extension professionals (Bowling & Brahm, 2002; Puetz & Kroth, 2009). Second, assessment teams should be *diverse* in composition and training, to better reflect and capture the diversity and heterogeneity that exists within the community (Anderson, 1997; Hildebrand, 1981). Third, engagement should be as *rapid* as possible without compromising the quality of the work (Beebe, 1987). It is crucial to recognize and honor the constraints on participation faced by members of the community, including time, opportunity costs, and perceptions of others.

We elected to use the sondeo, a method named for the Spanish term for "sounding out." The sondeo method (Hildebrand, 1981) was developed for rapid assessment of community-defined priorities and for placing them within a broader social, economic, and environmental context. Consistent with the themes identified in the literature, the sondeo is *participatory*, and it requires the participation of *diverse* team members of different cultural and educational backgrounds. It is also *rapid*, efficiently utilizing limited resources such as time, money, and goodwill, both on the part of the assessment team and the community participants.

At Fond du Lac, we adopted the Ojibwe term "*nimbizindawaanaanig*," meaning *we listen to them*, in lieu of "sondeo," to better communicate our objectives to the community. In addition to the two broad goals stated above, one specific objective was to better understand factors that drive and/or inhibit use or interaction with natural resources, with a secondary objective to better understand what might facilitate new or increased use or interaction with natural resources. These specific objectives were not predetermined; they emerged from a series of discussions among the sondeo team members over the course of planning the process. Planning and training in the method were accomplished through several sessions between June and September of 2008. UMN's Institutional Review Board and FDL's Reservation Business Committee granted approval for the task and method.

The sondeo occurred over 3 days in the fall of 2008. Twenty community members were selected in advance. They were chosen to represent three perceived community groups: known natural resource users, probable natural resource users, and those with no certain connection to natural resources. The sondeo team was comprised of nine members: five from FDL's RMD and four from UMN Extension. Background and experience varied among team members and included forestry, natural resources management, conservation biology, education, youth development, leadership, and business.

Each day, sub-teams of two to three members conversed with community members; ideally, each team met with three individuals per day. Community members were asked to discuss their use of natural resources and to emphasize the factors that motivate, facilitate, and inhibit these interactions. Beyond this introductory framing of the discussion, conversations were unscripted. Community members were given freedom to interpret the question, and, as a result, the emergent themes were dynamic and took form only as the process progressed.

No notes were taken; team members recorded themes and discussed important details at a convenient location immediately after each conversation. At the end of the day, the nine team-members convened to share and discuss observations and summarize the themes that emerged. On the second and third day, sub-teams were shuffled, and the process was repeated. End-of-day sessions provided shared learning among the larger team and were used to formulate and refine the outline of a report that would become a common platform for future collaboration.

Resulting Themes

Perhaps the most universal and profound impressions made on our team centered on a theme of *disconnect*. Disconnect was perceptible at multiple scales: between individuals and natural resources; between individuals and their social networks; and, finally, between individuals and the Ojibwe culture.

Individuals and Natural Resources

Our impression of disconnect between *individuals and natural resources* resulted from numerous and varied comments about *disuse*, used here to indicate the decline in, or abandonment of, natural resource activity. In some cases, individuals described a decline in their own use or in use by family members. Some characterized what one person described as "asphalt Indians," those who never get off the road and into the woods. The impression was made that, for the majority, natural resource activities are diminishing in overall levels of participation, frequency of occurrence, or necessity, as resources become available through other means.

Individuals and Social Networks

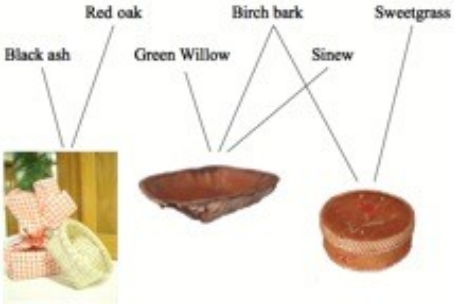
Individuals suggested that waning natural resource use relates to a lack of access to, or the absence of, non-family social networks. They described their perceived value of social networks differently, summarized below.

Social networks are a means for individuals to access *knowledge*. Community members recognized that, historically, only certain individuals were guardians, or stewards, of specialized knowledge. They emphasized obstacles to identifying and connecting with individuals knowledgeable about specific natural resource-oriented activities.

Social networks represent a means for individuals to access *resources*. Our conversations affirmed that many "finished products" are comprised of multiple natural resources (Figure 2). For example, birch bark baskets may also contain green willow shoots and deer sinew. Artisans often procure natural resources through family or friends, who gift or exchange raw materials. Social networks not only provide individuals with *access* to knowledge, but also provide opportunities for individuals or groups to *share* their specific knowledge, experience, and resources.

Figure 2.

Natural Resources as Components of Finished Products



Social networks interconnect with an *informal economy* fueled partly by natural resources. "Informal economy" refers to the economic realm outside of the formal sector and includes gifting, bartering, and unreported wages. Natural resources can be exchanged for other products as part of informal economic systems.

Social networks reinforce *social and cultural expectations*, or norms. For example, understanding the appropriate time of year or method to peel birch bark was reinforced through exchanged cultural knowledge. Influences are direct and indirect. For instance, FDL's Ojibwe language group has the cultural mission to learn and preserve the language, yet it is a social gathering where language is used to discuss many subjects, including traditional uses of natural resources.

On a grander scale, Ojibwe social networks are traditionally recognized as a culturally grounded means for *natural resource governance*. Many mentioned the wild rice committee, once considered by some to be a competent and appropriate body governing the harvest of wild rice. Some individuals expressed remorse for the loss of this institution and/or interest in its revival. Some expressed interest in a more general "cultural" natural resource committee or commission that could work with the RMD. It is important to highlight that while value was placed on the work of the RMD, for some folks there seemed to be an unmet need for a cultural counterpart. For these individuals the absence of this counterpart exemplified the perceived disconnect between natural resources and culture.

Individuals and Ojibwe Culture

Our conversations left no doubt as to the community members' perception of disconnect between many individuals and their culture. Most expressed that the Ojibwe language represented an essential, yet atrophied link.

> "Well, maybe we are losing it," they say. "We are losing the Indian culture." But maybe notâ the Indian language is still here. It is only us: we are lost and [therefore] losing everything. . . Like I heard an old gentleman say, "We're not losing our language, the language is losing us." â *J. Auginaush, in Living Our Language (Treuer, 2001: 157)*

Languages, like knowledge, customs, and beliefs, vary for social reasons but depend on specific environmental conditions to which people have adapted: what we eat, how food is preserved, the rhythms of work (Skutnabb-Kangas, Maffi, & Harmon, 2003). *Wub-e-ke-niew* says, "Indigenous peoples of this world have within their languages their understanding of the nature of humanity. Each language contains a legitimate and crucial piece of the knowledge necessary for humanity to survive" (Wub-e-ke-niew). Language is at once a cultural and natural resource. Research has shown a correlation between linguistic and

biological diversity (Harmon & Maffi, 2002), and languages have been called the DNA of cultures (Skutnabb-Kangas et al., 2003). Languageâ and in particular the existence of certain wordsâ reflects local biodiversity and the complexity of ecological relationships.

When a language is lost, so is embedded knowledge (ecological, cultural, etc.). One individual offered the example of alder (*Alnus rugosa)*. The Ojibwe name for alder is *wadoop*, formed from the word *wado*, meaning blood clot. A traditional medicinal use for alder is as a topical application to stop bleeding. This example demonstrates that language provides a key to cultural practices. The practice of language equates to the practice of culture; it provides a means for individuals to connect with their natural and cultural environment.

Conclusions

The sondeo method has received little to no attention in the domestic Extension context despite being developed nearly 30 years ago. Its application has been primarily in international development. Our experience at Fond du Lac suggests that there is a place for this method in Extension's toolkit.

The sondeo fosters exposure and interaction with the community. The FDL sondeo surpassed the objective of providing the Extension educator with a rich, introductory experience to Band members, as well as to the team members from FDL's Resource Management Division. It provided an opportunity to listen to the voices of 20 community members and allowed those individuals to lead the conversation in unexpected directions. Moreover, the sondeo fostered physical exploration of the community. Interviews occurred in all three of the Reservation's districts, at community members' homes and local gathering places. We perceived an advantage to engaging community members on their terms and in their comfort zones.

The sondeo reveals valuable knowledge to the assessment team members. The FDL sondeo revealed lessons that would not likely have emerged had we engaged community members through a scripted interview or focus group. One team member and longstanding FDL employee shared that over his tenure he had heard many of the themes that emerged. However, he went on to assert that only through hearing each person tell his or her own story, and through hearing them in close temporal proximity, did the collective voice emerge, bringing into focus the central themes and their greater significance.

Most notably, we learned about atrophied connections of individuals and their varied forms: to knowledge, to social networks, and to culture. We learned that natural resources are a link to deeper knowledge of Ojibwe culture and that Ojibwe culture is a link to a deeper knowledge of natural resources. Thus, deeper understanding of one should facilitate enhanced understanding of the other. We learned that the connections largely reside in the Ojibwe language. Community members asserted that language represents a critical cultural resource with potential to enhance knowledge of Ojibwe culture and use of natural resources.

Our sondeo also revealed a great challenge for Extension professionals working in Indian Country. Namely, as educators we will need to play a role in facilitating reintegration of topical and cultural knowledge, and we will likely find language to be instrumental to this process. For Extension to foster culturally appropriate learning and, overall, to succeed in Indian Country (or other communities), it will be essential to explore new approaches to integrate cultural considerations and language, regardless of the given topic or theme.

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