

CONDUCTING TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE RESEARCH IN THE GWICH'IN SETTLEMENT AREA A GUIDE FOR RESEARCHERS

The Gwich'in recognize and value the fact that living on the land for many millennia has provided them with an extensive body of knowledge, values, beliefs and practices that many people today refer to as traditional knowledge. This knowledge, which has been passed down orally and through personal experience and spiritual teachings, is the foundation of Gwich'in identity and survival. It continues to have relevance today and draws its strength from being used, revised and continuously updated to take into consideration new knowledge. The Gwich'in hold this knowledge in trust for future generations in the belief that this knowledge is of benefit to themselves and all humanity. The Gwich'in believe the best way to ensure its survival is to continue to use it and share it in a matter that respects this knowledge (Preamble, GTC TK Policy, 2004).

INTRODUCTION

The Gwich'in Tribal Council

The Gwich'in, as represented by the Gwich'in Tribal Council (GTC), are the holders of Gwich'in Traditional Knowledge (TK) in and around the Gwich'in Settlement Area (GSA). The GTC takes a lead role in the management of Gwich'in Traditional Knowledge issues in the GSA by monitoring and guiding the collection, use and distribution of Gwich'in Traditional Knowledge. In taking on this role, the GTC will work to ensure that Gwich'in Traditional Knowledge is used ethically and safeguarded for future generations of Gwich'in beneficiaries.

Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute

The Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute (GSCI) is the heritage arm of the Gwich'in Tribal Council and has been authorized by the GTC to implement the Gwich'in TK Policy on its behalf.

The Gwich'in Welcome Collaborative Research

The Gwich'in welcome collaborative research that invites research participants and local community members to determine appropriate research areas and approaches. Collaborative research methodologies often involve direct community benefits in the way of training, education, capacity building, elder-youth interaction and employment.

BEFORE THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Gwich'in TK Policy

Any research that documents Gwich'in Traditional Knowledge requires a GSCI Research Agreement to be completed and forwarded to the GSCI Executive Director and Research Director along with a copy of the consent form and questionnaire. See Schedule A of the

Gwich'in Tribal Council TK Policy (2004).¹ It is recommended that researchers contact the Executive Director for initial discussions about their research before completing the agreement. The GSCI research agreement has an extensive list of requirements to be covered in an informed consent statement, which should be followed.

Meeting with Community Councils

Local protocol is to meet initially with the Chief and Council followed by an introduction to the local Renewable Resources Council (RRC) office, and Designated Gwich'in Organization (DGO) office. Call the Chief or the Band Manager at the band offices in each Gwich'in community to make the initial contact. Include pre-meeting expenses in your research budget that will allow you to present proposed research in person at their scheduled monthly meetings. Explain in plain language your proposed research and schedule of work including the dates you will be reporting back after the research is completed. If you require community participation in your research, ask for a list of names and phone numbers of possible Elders and people who may be approached. It may be beneficial to hire a community assistant who could identify participants and who could also determine whether or not a Gwich'in interpreter/translator will be a part of your team.

Community Awareness

Public awareness of your project in the communities will be of great benefit and interest to people especially if your research relates to the land or people's health. Prior to project start up, we suggest broadcasting your proposed work and perhaps a description of research questions on CBC Radio in Inuvik and the local radio station in Aklavik and Tsiigehtchic and on CBQM radio in Fort McPherson. Where possible, ask the local Chief or Band Manager to arrange for you to go on the radio to explain your proposed research.

DURING THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Being with the Community

It is good to be seen in the community over the course of the research project and to drop in to see the Chief, the RRC and DGO offices to say 'hello'. Community members appreciate when researchers are visible and participate in community affairs such as feasts and other activities, and greet people when walking around the community.

Time and Date of Interviews

For community interviews, ask each interviewee beforehand by telephone, if possible, to select the best time and day for their interview. While some elders are early risers, others may prefer a later time in the day or an evening interview. Prior to the time of the interview, the community assistant can call ahead to make sure interviewees are ready.

¹ This document can be accessed at <http://www.gwichin.ca/TheGwichin/traditional.html>.

Place to Interview

For community interviews, give each interviewee the option to do their interviews in their home or a quiet place such as a pre-arranged empty public office. Be aware that if the band board room is to be used for the interview a fee may apply.

Interviewing Gwich'in Elders

Use a local interpreter/translator as needed. Brief the interpreter/translator beforehand on your research project and topic. When speaking to or interviewing Gwich'in Elders, we suggest that a Gwich'in interpreter/translator work with your team. On your behalf they will provide a clear description, through their translation, of your research work and its objectives. Contact the local Gwich'in Council office for the names of a local Gwich'in interpreter/translator who could work with you. Interpreter/translators or community assistants are normally paid an hourly or daily rate.

Use Plain Language

When speaking with Gwich'in Elders, please speak in a moderate loud and clear voice using plain language as some Elders may be hard-of-hearing and not understand higher level, technical or medical English terms used to explain research work. It may be good to practice your introduction with your community assistant who could help you identify areas that are unclear. Also when speaking with community people and Elders it is a good practice to paraphrase your explanations and any questions you may have. Paraphrasing will result in optimal feedback and interaction with Elders who support meaningful community-based research work.

Participant Confidentiality

Regarding confidentiality, the GSCI suggests that Gwich'in Elders and participants interviewed are given the option to provide their names in the research. Our people like to know who provided Traditional Knowledge information. Their names on tapes and/or transcripts and final reports will add credibility to the Traditional Knowledge provided. The confidentiality clause may be a different matter for medical or social research.

Use Visual Aids

Bring visual aids (like maps, posters, displays, etc.) to the interviews to jog interviewees' memory as needed. People enjoy looking at maps and especially photographs of people.

Caution!

For reasons of safety and credibility of the research, avoid interviewing any persons if they appear to be under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

AFTER THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Keeping in Touch

After completing your research work in the community or area, write letters of thanks to the Chief, the RRC and DGO councils. Also outline what the next steps will be in the research (e.g. transcribe recorded interviews, analysis of research, draft reports, etc.).

Research Material

All transcripts from taped interviews with Gwich'in Elders and other Gwich'in participants along with audio and video tapes or digital files, research photos, maps and other research materials are to be sent to the GSCI office in Tsiigehtchic at the end of the study. These will be added to the GSCI Archives.

Reporting Back

At the completion of the study, send three hard copies and digital files of the final research report, thesis, or posters to the GSCI office in Tsiigehtchic. As well send separate hard copies to the respective local Gwich'in Council offices. The Gwich'in Tribal Council publishes a widely distributed newsletter several times a year. Researchers are encouraged to submit a short plain language report on their research for this newsletter.

As part of the follow-up process, all researchers working with Gwich'in Traditional Knowledge should return to the community to present the findings of their research. Research results should be presented or displayed in the Gwich'in communities in culturally relevant and creative ways. An example of the latter would be poster or audio-visual formats (p. 14, Reporting Back, Gwich'in TK Research Guidelines, Gwich'in TK Policy, 2004).

CHECKLIST FOR RESEARCHERS

- Are familiar with the Gwich'in Traditional Knowledge Policy.
- Copy of GSCI Research Agreement submitted to GSCI Executive Director & Research Director.
 - ___ Include copy of consent form and questionnaire you are using.
- Initial presentation to Chief and Council, local RRC and DGOs.
 - ___ Leave behind a copy of research schedule.
- A local Gwich'in interpreter/translator and community assistant are hired as required.
- Research Materials
 - ___ Mail copies of sound and video recordings (digital and audio), electronic transcripts, maps, photographs, field notes, final report (hard copy and CD) to the GSCI head office in Tsiigehtchic.
- Reporting back
 - ___ Present in person your research findings and results to the Chief and Council, local RRC and DGOs at their monthly meetings and at a public meeting as required.
 - ___ Forward a hard copy of final reports to each interviewees and the community when available.