

Traditional Ecological Knowledge at Work



In **British Columbia**, Environment Canada has been working for several years to build partnerships with Aboriginal peoples to achieve important conservation objectives. A key element of this strategy has been the creation of conservation interns who work with the ministry to inventory populations and habitats on their territories. Such capacity building is aimed at better equipping Aboriginal communities to handle future resource-management responsibilities.

Aboriginal TEK is also a key component of recovery programs for two highly threatened habitats out West: the South Okanagan's pocket desert and the Garry Oak ecosystems of southern Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands. In the South Okanagan, the Osoyoos Band is helping to preserve some of the last undeveloped and unfragmented desert habitat—a significant part of which is located on their reserve—by developing a cultural centre with interpretive trails and guides. The strategy for Canada's endangered Garry Oak ecosystems incorporates aspects of historic Aboriginal management regimes, such as the use of prescribed fire, active cultivation techniques, and the harvesting of traditional foods on some of the few remaining tracts of these grassy parklands.

On the other side of the country, the **Ashkui Traditional Ecological Knowledge Initiative** is using the knowledge of the Innu people to examine the landscape and ecology of northern Labrador. With large-scale development pressures in the region increasing, and a lack of scientific information available for environmental assessments, the Innu and Inuit are an important source of ecological knowledge. Environment Canada scientists worked closely with Aboriginal Elders to learn more about elements of the land that are critical to the Innu culture and way of life. Together, they decided to focus their collaboration on Ashkui—the areas of rivers and lakes that are first to become free of ice each spring.

The first couple of years of the Ashkui Initiative were spent building relationships between Elders and scientists, conducting interviews, shaping the project, and finding study areas of common interest. Meetings were held in camps, with scientists spending several days at a time on the land. Traditional knowledge was compiled into a database, and a series of scientific questions were formulated as the basis for research at 13 Ashkui sites. Added value is provided back to the community through such products as newsletters, posters, CD-ROMs, technical reports on water quality and potability, and spring ice-risk maps.