

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

- Indigenous Environmental Knowledge (IEK) is often considered in ethnobotany or ethnoscience¹ or to feature the 'distinct ways of knowing' of numerous Indigenous communities².
- The Ontario Wetland Evaluation System (OWES) was produced to address wetland loss³ and evaluate existing wetlands in order to determine their provincial significance.
- Presently, non-Indigenous practitioners mostly center their understanding of IEK as a utilitarian fact – meaning IEK can only provide instrumental value in achieving conservation outcomes⁴.
- In response, power-sharing arrangements (co-management and Indigenous Protected Conservation Areas (IPCA)) have emerged in Canada to address cross-cultural knowledge-sharing gaps and further involve Indigenous Peoples and communities in conservation⁵.
- Nearly 68% of wetlands have been lost in Ontario and remains prevalent today⁶. This poses the question of whether the full suite of available knowledge is being used to protect wetlands in Ontario?
- As such, through using insights from experts gained through semi-structured interviews, this research aims to provide recommendations for how to better protect vulnerable wetlands through braiding Indigenous Environmental Knowledge within OWES.

MAIN RESEARCH RESULTS

Perception of Wetland Protection in Ontario

- All Academic interviewees affirm that the provincial system is not adequately protecting wetlands. These findings may be linked to the current political dynamics in Ontario. The Governmental and Anonymous interviewees preferred not to answer.

Indigenous Involvement in Wetland Conservation and OWES

- All interviewees affirm that Indigenous involvement can improve existing wetland initiatives in Ontario. The main involvement benefit is "cross-cultural" – meaning that gifts (knowledge, principles, and values) would be used to improve wetland conservation outcomes and Crown-Indigenous relations.
- All Academic interviewees question the feasibility of braiding IEK into current conservation policies since IEK integration is centered around a Eurocentric view⁸ and not guided by Indigenous principles.
- Two Academic interviewees mention cross-cultural concepts such as 'ethical space' and 'two-eyed seeing' to bring together different cultures and equally recognize sources of knowledge.
- All interviewees agreed that Indigenous involvement would improve the four components of OWES.
- Despite involvement benefits, all interviewees mention that Indigenous Peoples may not culturally relate to OWES. Thus, wetland managers must be open to personal and professional transformations and invested in building relationships with Indigenous Peoples to develop new wetland indicators.

A Pathway to Braiding: Unlearning

- Academic interviewees note that governmental managers must be willing to reconcile settler-Indigenous and settler-land relationships to start braiding knowledge systems.
- Indigenous Peoples must be involved in creating wetland indicators that strengthen their existing relationship and ongoing connection to the land.
- Respect must be prioritized to bring Indigenous Peoples back into conservation and initiate the long-term process of braiding knowledge and healing current relations.
- The teachings of 'humility' can reduce the colonial baggage of working with Indigenous Peoples.

RESEARCH QUESTION

- How can Indigenous Environmental Knowledge be braided into the Ontario Wetland Evaluation System?
- What role can Elders or Indigenous Knowledge Keepers play in the development of the Ontario Wetland Evaluation System?

UNDERSTANDING BRAIDING

Drawing on Kimmerer's contributions from *Braiding Sweetgrass*, I refer to braiding as a concept in my research that ethically weaves Indigenous ecological perspectives and wisdom and those from Western science to repair existing relations between the human and non-human world.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

- This research was guided by the recommendations included in the *First Nations Ethics Guide on Research and Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge*, published by the Assembly of First Nations, to minimize the social risks of involving Indigenous participants in this study.

Participants

- In total, 7 interviews were conducted with non-Indigenous individuals – 5 Academics, 1 Governmental Representative, and 1 Anonymous interviewee. Unfortunately, no Elders or Knowledge Keepers were featured in this research.

Semi-structured Interviews

- To capture the wide range of knowledge, experiences, and viewpoints from participants, this research conducted semi-structured interviews. Four primary questions and follow-up questions were asked to collect primary data.

Data Analysis

- Interview transcripts were analyzed through an inductive reasoning approach to detect patterns or regularities within the dataset, produce future recommendations, and form general conclusions⁷.

OTHER RESEARCH RESULTS

Characteristics of Wetlands and Wetlands Conservation Management

- All interviewees indicated a tremendous concern with the disappearance of wetlands.
- Most interviewees failed to mention the socio-ecological importance of wetlands to both Indigenous communities and settler society, except for Academic interviewee 5.
- Two Academic interviewees recognize that OWES does not adequately consider the connectivity and interconnected needs of lands and the non-human world in wetland evaluations.

"Managing" vs. "Respecting"

- All Academic interviewees note fundamental differences between managing and being in relation to Creation. Previous exposure to teachings of 'respect' may guide current relations outside of modernity.
- Other interviewees did not perceive a difference between these terms. They also emphasize that provincial policies effectively communicate the ecological features/importance of wetlands.

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- ⁷Trochim, W. M. K. (2001). *Research methods knowledge base* (2nd ed.). Atomic Dog Pub.
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RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Engage Indigenous Peoples with Respect

Use Indigenous-led concepts such as ethical space and two-eyed seeing to engage and involve Indigenous Peoples in conservation.

2. Prioritize the Connectivity of Ecosystems Outside PSWs

Legally recognize other effective conservation measures and local Indigenous knowledge to restore fragmented landscapes in Southern Ontario.

3. Increases Indigenous Peoples' Access to Land

Strengthen Indigenous Peoples access to the land in question of management by including an indicator in OWES and/or a newly developed system.