

# Accessing Indigenous Traditional Knowledge: A Toolkit

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## 1.0 Background on the Toolkit

The Toolkit outlines how to use storytelling and talking circles to facilitate the sharing of Traditional Knowledge (TK) about Indigenous resilience among TK holders, their communities and local emergency management practitioners. It focuses on accessing information about community strengths, past emergencies, existing risks and wise practices to help Indigenous communities become more resilient to disasters.

The details about storytelling and talking circles are provided as a guide only. Each community should feel free to adapt these techniques or substitute an approach that meets the needs of their specific traditions. We are aware that not all Indigenous communities undertake talking circles as we outline in this document. Instead, communities may want to use some other type of community gathering or workshop to facilitate the sharing of TK.

Prior to undertaking a new storytelling or talking circle process in your community, it's a good idea to check and see what information may have been collected through a previous process. These older records might be a good starting point for gathering new information.

This Toolkit was developed by a team of researchers at the Justice Institute of British Columbia. It was then reviewed and approved by a team of Indigenous consultants. In addition, the Toolkit was piloted with two Indigenous communities and a grand council: Dokis First Nation, ON, Tobique First Nation, NB, and Prince Albert Grand Council, SK (Table 1; click on the theme name to view the clip). The project was funded by Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada.

**Table 1: Pilot Locations**

Video Clip Theme Name
Dokis: Community Background
Tobique: Community Background
Prince Albert Grand Council: Background

The final Toolkit is available at the Community Disaster Resilience Planning (CDRP) website: <https://cdrp.jibc.ca/resilience-knowledge-sharing-toolkit/>. The outcomes from undertaking the process outlined in this Toolkit can be used when working through the CDRP process. Along with this written document, you will also find a series of video clips on the website, if you'd like to see the various parts of this Toolkit 'in action' and a few examples of TK's rich contribution to Indigenous resilience.

Please note that the term ‘Indigenous’ is used throughout this Toolkit to be consistent with the original ADRP project. It is understood that some prefer the term ‘Indigenous’. This Toolkit may be freely downloaded and used. If any component of the Toolkit is incorporated into your work we request that you provide a full reference and/or citation. We would be delighted to hear how you have used the Toolkit and video clips. Please feel free to contact us through the website with any questions or comments you might have.

## 2.0 Thoughts About Some Key Concepts

This resource cannot hope to encompass the many rich TK systems, traditions and perspectives. Instead, a brief overview and a few links are provided. Please click on the video clip theme names listed in Table 2 for examples of how TK contributes to Indigenous resilience at the pilot locations.

**Table 2: TK and Indigenous Resilience**

Video Clip Theme Name
<a href="#">Dokis: Consulting with Elders</a>
<a href="#">Dokis: Transmission of Traditional Knowledge</a>
<a href="#">Tobique High Resilience: TK and Innovation</a>
<a href="#">Tobique: Disaster Resilience and TK</a>
<a href="#">Prince Albert Grand Council: TK and Elder Expertise</a>
<a href="#">Prince Albert Grand Council Resilience: Local Level Capacity and Elders</a>

### 2.1 Traditional Knowledge, Hazards, Disasters and Resilience

One of the key premises of all TK systems (also called Indigenous Knowledge as well as many other names) is that human beings are holistically interconnected with everything else. Holism refers to the interrelatedness among the intellectual, spiritual, emotional and physical realms that form a healthy person and community. It also implies responsibility to past, present and future generations. Plants, animals, elements of nature and the land, and the spirit world are integral parts of a holistic perspective. All of these connections are located in particular places, environments and geographies, and are related to specific histories, cultures and traditions. Knowledge holders often combine teachings passed down from ancestors with information acquired through their own experiences and training, to provide a deep pool of wise practices about all aspects of community wellness and resilience. Please click on the video clip theme names listed in Table 3 for examples of TK and community resilience at the pilot locations.

**Table 3: TK and Community Resilience**

Video Clip Theme Name
<a href="#">Dokis: Youth Engagement</a>
<a href="#">Dokis: TK and High Resilience</a>
<a href="#">Tobique Low Resilience: Residential School Legacy</a>
<a href="#">Tobique Low Resilience: Land Use Policies</a>
<a href="#">Tobique: Gender &amp; Community Resilience</a>

From a disaster management perspective, TK can be used to:

- identify hazards
- place the hazards within a culturally relevant context
- explain the hazards in relation to what is at risk
- provide specific information about risk exposures
- communicate information
- inform effective coping activities to reduce risk
- monitor and evaluate ongoing activities

Due to the close relationship with the land, long-term observations and oral histories, TK can offer valuable insights about environmental change including climate change. By incorporating a holistic perspective, TK can also help us understand the various practices and lifeways that make a community strong and resilient, including the use of traditional foods, language, and cultural traditions.

## 2.2 Traditional Knowledge Resources

Oral traditions can teach people how to deal with hazards such as tsunamies. In this example, from the Tsimshian Nation, British Columbia, the story went back 300 years and taught people how to watch for the signs of a tsunami and seek shelter.

<http://bc.ctvnews.ca/oral-tradition-keeps-legend-of-1700-tsunami-alive-1.620699>

The Chiefs of Ontario published this paper which summarizes the Indigenous Traditional Knowledge Elders Workshop: <http://www.chiefs-of-ontario.org/sites/default/files/files/ATK%20workshop%202008.pdf>

First Nations in BC Knowledge Network provide some resources at:

<http://fnbc.info/resources/126>

This book consists of many chapters focused on Traditional Ecological Knowledge concepts and cases: <http://www.idrc.ca/EN/Resources/Publications/openebooks/683-6/index.html>

United Nations University has a focused Traditional Knowledge initiative: <http://www.unutki.org/>

United Nations, Framework Convention on Climate Change provides a technical paper about the use of Traditional Knowledge for climate change adaptation: <http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2013/tp/11.pdf>

### **2.3 Hazard and Disaster Resilience**

Hazards are threats to people and the built and natural environments people value and depend on. An important first step in developing a disaster resilience plan is the identification of these threats and the analysis of the potential risks to people and their communities. Hazard resilience is the capacity to reduce the community's risk level to potential threats and deal effectively with any impacts.

Disaster resilience – the ability to survive and thrive in the face of uncertainty and threats – is already a key dimension of Indigenous communities. It is also the cornerstone of effective emergency management across all phases of a disaster, from mitigation to preparedness through response and recovery. There is much to learn about resilience from Indigenous communities; this resilience is one of Canada's biggest assets. At the same time, the emergency planning capacity of Indigenous communities is often constrained by a lack of resources, historical legacies and access to user-friendly risk mitigation planning tools and processes. Please click on the video clip theme names listed in Table 4 for examples of TK and disaster resilience at the pilot locations.

**Table 4: TK and Disaster Resilience**

Video Clip Theme Name
<a href="#">Dokis and TK: Identification of Hazards</a>
<a href="#">Dokis: Elders and Preparedness</a>
<a href="#">Dokis: TK and Low Resilience</a>
<a href="#">Tobique: High Disaster Resilience</a>
<a href="#">Tobique: Disaster Resilience and TK</a>
<a href="#">Tobique: Disaster Resilience</a>
<a href="#">Tobique Disaster Resilience: Preparedness/Planning</a>
<a href="#">Tobique High Resilience: TK and Innovation</a>
<a href="#">Prince Albert Grand Council: Fire Impact at Montreal Lake 2015</a>
<a href="#">Prince Albert Grand Council: Disaster Resilience, TK and Response Capacity</a>
<a href="#">Prince Albert Grand Council: Hazard Resilience and Wise Practices</a>
<a href="#">Prince Albert Grand Council: Talking Circle Protocol</a>
<a href="#">Prince Albert Grand Council and Disaster Resilience: Wollaston Lake TK</a>
<a href="#">Prince Albert Grand Council and Disaster Resilience: Cumberland House TK</a>
<a href="#">Prince Albert Grand Council: Hazard Risk Analysis</a>

### 3.0 Storytelling

This Toolkit will help communities access their Indigenous resilience TK through two key methods: Storytelling with Elders and Talking Circles with the larger community. The information gathered can be used to inform the Community Disaster Resilience Planning process or any other activities designed to improve the community’s capacities. Please click on the video clip theme names listed in Table 5 for examples of storytelling at the pilot locations.

**Table 5: TK and Storytelling**

Video Clip Theme Name
<a href="#">Dokis: Protocol</a>
<a href="#">Dokis: Transmission of Traditional Knowledge</a>
<a href="#">Tobique Low Resilience: Residential School Legacy</a>
<a href="#">Tobique Low Resilience: Land Use Policies</a>
<a href="#">Prince Albert Grand Council: Disaster Resilience, TK and Response Capacity</a>
<a href="#">Prince Albert Grand Council: TK and Elder Expertise</a>

Elders are sacred knowledge keepers and the carriers of communally generated knowledge. Through stories, Elders:

- share their knowledge
- educate communities
- emphasize important life lessons
- aid listeners to understand and take responsibility for their place on the land
- sustain culture and traditions

In Indigenous communities, culture, knowledge and traditions are often shared through stories. Stories can be considered to be either oral traditions or oral histories. Oral traditions are often related to stories transmitted down through the generations while oral histories are usually connected to personal recollections.

Stories have many benefits and uses. Through stories, today's generation is linked to the beliefs and traditions of their ancestors. Storytelling is a powerful form of teaching that helps expand our abilities to listen closely. Storytellings can be communal sharings that bind communities together, both relationally and spiritually. Stories can be used for communication, education, relationship building, preservation of culture, entertainment, historical memory, and as a coping mechanism to deal with death, illness and tragedy.

Some of the most common types of stories are creation and origin stories. There are also personal stories, including survival stories, related to particular places and experiences. Indigenous stories are often told in relationship to the land, water and sky. Stories can have a serious tone or they can be very humorous and they may feature animals and tricksters.

Stories may be passed down from generation to generation. Stories are living things that are told and retold, shaped and refitted to meet the needs of their audience or to address contemporary circumstances. Stories can have many different meanings, depending on how they are interpreted by the listeners.

### **3.1 Using Storytelling to Gather Information**

Below we provide some information about how storytelling could be used to gather information about Indigenous resilience. This general process should be tailored to the specific traditions, needs and preferences of the particular community.

#### **Principles of Storytelling**

The guiding principles of storytelling include respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, interrelatedness and collaboration.

Sharing knowledge through stories is a gift. When Elders pass on knowledge that they expect will be shared, those hearing the story have the responsibility to use the information provided wisely and to distribute it according to agreed upon approaches and protocols.

### **Process of Storytelling**

Adequate preparation is critical prior to using storytelling for information gathering. This can include participation in ceremony, developing a relationship with the storyteller/Elder, and prior discussions regarding the purpose of the project (see Section 5) and how the information will be used. Specific attention to ethics and protocols must be included throughout the process (Section 6).

Stories can be audio- or video-recorded, notes can be taken, or, if the listener has the capacity, the story can be committed to memory. It is important to discuss how the details of the story will be captured prior to commencing.

Storytelling is a collaborative process. Those hearing the story must be ready to listen. This calls the speaker and listener into a relationship based on respect and reciprocity. Listeners have the responsibility to be active participants in the story. Listeners are expected to interpret stories from their own perspective and find meaning from their own experiences.

### **How to use the Gathered Information**

The stories can be used to help inform community approaches to improve Indigenous resilience. The story may need to be interpreted to provide input into the CDRP or similar processes. If recorded, consider transcribing or reviewing for the relevant details. It might be useful to discuss your interpretations of the story with others in your community who are also interested in resilience. Consider sharing these insights with the storyteller and the broader community.

**Recording Stories:** It is important to remember that stories that are ‘frozen in time’ through recording or text cannot be adjusted to the listener or the particular circumstance. It is inevitable that some of the meaning and nuance of the story will be changed or lost.

**Language:** Language is important because it is the form that gives meaning to the stories. If a story is translated, or retold in a different language, there may be subtle shifts in the meaning that is conveyed by the story.

### 3.2 Storytelling Resources

The Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling has a variety of resources:  
<http://storytelling.concordia.ca/>

A classic example of storytelling and the oral tradition from Smoke Signals:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kBEhz8vw2AM>

This video is about storytelling as understood by the Stolo people:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wm9AZ3x5fpw>

The oral tradition of storytelling: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BNY7L\\_RdObA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BNY7L_RdObA)

The Ojibway creation story: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Etn92Ms8plo>

Coyote can transform himself into different shapes and he can be a messenger, cultural hero, or a fool. See for example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=guu0EflnQPI>

### 4.0 Talking Circles

Circles represent a holistic approach to life. The circle symbolizes that the whole of life appears in circular patterns and that we are all related. Many things in life are circular including the earth, moon and sun. By honoring the circle, we honor the process of life and growth. Medicine Wheels are a good example of the importance of circles.

A talking circle is group discussion method used to discuss a topic in an egalitarian and non-confrontational manner. It is generally believed that talking circles were started by Woodland Tribes in the Midwest who used them as a governance consultation process. Please click on the video clip theme names listed in Table 6 for examples of TK and talking circles at the pilot locations. Please note that not all communities use a formal talking circle approach. Adjust any of the information provided in this section to suit the needs of your community.

There are many different types of talking circles including: Healing Circles, Teaching Circles, Elder Circles and Community Circles. Talking circles typically use some type of specially chosen object, such as a stick, feather, rock or crystal to pass around the circle. The object empowers its holder to speak from the heart. Only those holding the object may speak.

**Table 6: TK and Talking Circles**

Video Clip Theme Name
<a href="#">Dokis: Planning Community Engagement</a>
<a href="#">Dokis: Youth Engagement</a>
<a href="#">Tobique: Talking Circle Process and Opening</a>
<a href="#">Tobique: Gender and Community Resilience</a>
<a href="#">Prince Albert Grand Council: Talking Circle Protocol</a>
<a href="#">Prince Albert Grand Council and Disaster Resilience: Wollaston Lake TK</a>

Talking circles are not about debate or argument. Their purpose is to provide an opportunity to share one’s self and each person’s experiences, feelings and thoughts. Through talking circles, the group can connect with collective wisdom. Circles facilitate knowledge sharing and can lead to ideas and options beyond what one person could have imagined.

#### **4.1 Using Talking Circles to Gather and Share Information**

Below we provide some information about how the talking circles could be used to gather information about disaster resilience. See Section 5 for potential themes to discuss. Talking circles can be used in conjunction with storytelling.

##### **Principles of Talking Circles**

The guiding principles of talking circles include confidentiality, uninterrupted discourse, respect, attentive open-hearted listening, acceptance of diversity of views and opinions

##### **Rules of the Talking Circle**

1. The person holding the object is the only one with the right to speak, even if s/he takes a long time to think about what to say and there’s a pause in the conversation. The object is typically passed around in a clockwise direction.
2. If a person doesn’t wish to speak s/he passes the object on to the next person.
3. Introduce yourself on the first round.

4. If somebody else in the circle wants to comment on what's being said, those comments are limited to nods or soft murmurs of agreement. Negative comments are not appropriate. Otherwise, each person must wait her or his turn.
5. The focus of this talking circle is on Indigenous resilience but each person is free to interpret this in his/her own way. The person with the object may talk about whatever is in his/her heart or on his/her mind, safe and comfortable in the knowledge that nobody will criticize or interrupt him/her.
6. If a person talks overlong, people around the circle could signal this through a discreet cough. "Overlong" is usually defined according to the situation, but could be three to ten minutes, depending on the size of the group, the topic, and how long the group wants to spend together. If you have the object and notice that others are coughing, it's time to pass it along.
7. The circle can go around several times, until everybody has had at least one opportunity to talk, or until the allotted time has been used up. After everyone has had the chance to talk, the object can be passed around once again to give everyone the feeling that they have left nothing unsaid.
8. What is said in the circle must stay in the circle. It is disrespectful to discuss or repeat anything that was shared during the circle after the circle concludes.

*Note:* Consider including the rules of your talking circle when inviting participants.

### **Talking Circle Process**

- Opening: Blessing/ceremony/smudging, as appropriate
- Opening Remarks: Could include any of the following ideas. Background and rules about talking circles, framing of topic by spiritual leaders (e.g., story), recognition of Elders in attendance, provision of topical knowledge by local experts and research team, key themes
- Rounds of Talking Circle
- Final Round: To signify no one has anything left to say
- Closing: As appropriate (Could be followed by community event such as coffee and snacks, a feast or potluck dinner).

Talking circles can be audio- or video-recorded or notes can be taken. It is important to discuss how the details of the talking circle will be captured with the participants prior to commencing. See Section 6 for details about protocols and ethics.

## **Facilitator (Circle Keeper) Role**

The facilitator could be an active participant, or if not a member of the community, might simply provide guidance on themes to discuss and encourage adherence of circle rules. If part of a research project and a formal ethics application process has been undertaken, the facilitator will need to obtain informed consent from the participants. The facilitator reminds speakers that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

The facilitator models appropriate behaviour (respect, fairness, empathy). Facilitators strive to remain present and committed to the wisdom that is being offered. They work to keep a strong feeling of connectedness within the circle.

## **How to use the Gathered Information**

The talking circle comments can be used to help inform the tools in the CDRP and community approaches to improve Indigenous resilience. If recorded, consider transcribing or reviewing for the relevant details. It might be useful to discuss your interpretations of the comments made with others interested in Indigenous resilience. Consider sharing these insights with the participants and the community.

## **4.2 Talking Circle Resources**

This link provides one perspective on medicine wheels:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LK5Et8MJJA>

This site is from a Mi'kmaq perspective: <http://www.muiniskw.org/pgCulture2c.htm>

First Nations Pedagogy Online offers this information:

<http://firstnationspedagogy.ca/circletalks.html>

Dancing to Eagle Spirit Society provides these details:

<http://www.dancingtoeaglespiritsociety.org/circles.php>

Charter for Compassion also provides some interesting information:

<http://voiceseducation.org/content/native-american-talking-circle>

## **5.0 Themes to Guide Discussions**

The themes for discussion can vary depending on the needs of the community. The themes outlined below are specifically designed to provide input into the CDRP process. When discussing the themes, people will likely provide examples and stories related to them. It will be up to the community team leading the discussion to decide how to best

use the materials provided. Stories and information from the talking circles could be used to help with any of the components of the CDRP process. When sessions are fairly short, it might make sense to hold more than one session if there is interest in getting information about several themes. If holding only one storytelling session and/or talking circle, it might make sense to choose a narrower focus. The details of each of the themes and sub-themes can be found on the CDRP website.

### **Getting Started**

- Membership on the planning committee
- Setting community boundaries and mapping key resources
- Getting community buy-in

### **Resilience Assessment**

- Identifying past, current and future risks and hazards
- Identifying current strategies to cope with risks and hazards
- Identifying community strengths

### **Building a Resilience Plan**

- Developing a vision
- Identifying new strategies to cope with hazards and increase strengths
- Key components of a plan

### **Plan Implementation**

- Working on the plan
- Assessing progress and revisiting the plan

## **5.1 Key Theme Resources**

***Traditional Coping Strategies and Disaster Response: Examples from the South Pacific Region:*** This paper describes five common strategies employed to increase resilience: recognition of traditional methods; faith and religious beliefs; traditional governance and leadership; family and community involvement; and agriculture and food security (Fletcher et al. 2013, abstract).

***The Role of Indigenous Knowledge in Environmental Health Risk Management in Yukon, Canada:*** There was a recognized need by all participants for better collaboration between scientists and Yukon First Nations communities. These

communities have been involved in identifying and defining community concerns about past risk issues, setting a local context, and participating in communications strategies (Friendship and Furgal 2012, abstract).

***The Earth is Faster Now: Indigenous Observations of Arctic Environmental Change:*** As this volume shows, arctic residents have a great deal to say. Understanding and addressing climate change simply cannot be done without incorporating their specific and detailed views (Krupnik and Jolly 2002, xxi).

## **6.0 Cultural Sensitization, Protocols and Ethical Research Guidelines**

The information in this section is directed towards anyone who is interested in accessing TK about Indigenous resilience. That said, it is of particular importance that non-Indigenous allies, working with Indigenous partners adhere to these guidelines. Please click on the video clip themes listed in Tables 5 and 6 above for examples at the three pilot locations.

### **6.1 Cultural Sensitization and Protocols:**

Culturally appropriate research consists of two components. *Cultural competence* is the set of skills that allows people to develop their understanding and appreciation of cultural similarities and differences. It requires a willingness and ability to learn from knowledgeable persons from the community about community-based values, traditions and customs. *Cultural sensitivity* is the ability to be aware of the biases, prejudices and differences within one's own culture as well as awareness of other cultures. A culturally sensitive approach to research requires the active involvement of the Indigenous community in the planning and implementation of the entire project and a study design that incorporates culturally appropriate methods and protocols.

#### **Protocols**

Protocols provide guidelines for appropriate conduct and necessary information about how to behave in a certain situation or deal with a particular issue. Protocols are context and community specific, and when followed, reinforce and enhance the holders' value systems. Each community has its own sets of protocols related to ceremonies, gifting, appropriate customs for working with Elders, and so on. Researchers must cultivate cultural competence and sensitivity and demonstrate how they will respect Indigenous knowledge systems by following the protocols prescribed by the particular Indigenous community.

## 6.2 Research Ethics

Growing numbers of Canada's Indigenous peoples are contributing to research, changing the way in which research is conducted. Core values that underpin all ethical research with Indigenous communities are:

- consultation
- reciprocity
- respect
- justice

Research processes must involve Indigenous partners in ongoing consultation throughout the research process. Reciprocity is the obligation to give back for gifts received. Respect is expressed through obtaining free and informed consent, ensuring that intellectual and cultural property rights are preserved and adhering to Indigenous codes of research practice. Justice includes the acknowledgement of collective rights, concern for individual welfare, making sure the communities involved benefit from the research, and working to equalize the power imbalance between researchers and Indigenous communities.

Please note that in some circumstances, a specific research licence or research ethics board clearance might be necessary. It's a good idea to investigate local requirements with sufficient lead time to obtain any necessary permissions.

### Self-Care

Part of conducting research ethically is for the researcher to look after him/her self and monitor how s/he might be reacting to the information that is being shared. If s/he feels they have been triggered and are experiencing some negative effects, it is important to take extra time to regroup and access personal support systems.

## 6.3 Research Ethics Resources

First Nations have articulated their principles related to data collection and control. The principles are ownership, control, access and possession: <http://fnigc.ca/ocap.html>

The Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada and many other research organizations have specific policies on research ethics. For instance: <http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique/initiatives/tcps2-eptc2/chapter9-chapitre9/>

The Government of Canada has posted this information about Indigenous Traditional Knowledge and Intellectual Property Rights: <http://www.lop.parl.gc.ca/content/lop/researchpublications/prb0338-e.pdf>

The Social Planning and Research Council of BC has provided this guide for intercultural work between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples:  
[http://www.tru.ca/\\_shared/assets/bbt\\_guide23517.pdf](http://www.tru.ca/_shared/assets/bbt_guide23517.pdf)

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