Using a Participatory Process to Explore Contaminants Research Communication from a Community Perspective

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Introduction

- Contaminants are transported to Arctic Canada via atmospheric and oceanic pathways, accumulate in biota and biomagnify through food webs; highest levels in top trophic species that are country food for Northerners.
- Mercury (Hg) in the highly toxic, bioaccumulative form of methylmercury (MeHg) is considered a contaminant of high priority and concern.
- Enormous effort put into communicating contaminants information not achieving desired result: statements and actions of Northerners do not reflect importance of contamination.
- Communication processes have received limited focus and evaluation.
- Communication about contaminants needs to account for different ways of knowing, worldviews and languages, through cross-cultural discourse.

Methods

- CFL/ArcticNet Hg/MeHg research used as communication case study with participants in Sachs Harbour, NT (Fig. 1).
- Use participatory climate change studies done in Sachs Harbour as a model for contaminants research.
- Extended time spent with participants to develop relationships and in-depth understanding of local perceptions and concerns.
- Surveys and interviews conducted with participants.
- Initial semi-structured audio- and video-recorded interviews.
- Enable participants to share their knowledge and perceptions of contaminants and research communication.
- Group discussions where participants work ‘hands on’ with Hg and MeHg research to organize their own contaminants messages.
- Evaluate project for its usefulness in communicating contaminants research findings.
- Production of participant-led video based on our findings and experiences.

Preliminary Results

- Ten semi-structured interviews have occurred to date with a minimum of 4 more anticipated, and many informal discussions have occurred; survey development is currently in progress.
- Most participants find research in the North to be a ‘good idea’ and are aware of the various means used by researchers to communicate their findings.
- Research presentations in the community are seen as positive; however only 20% of participants could remember learning anything about contaminants at these presentations.
- The same 20% (who are actively engaged in research initiatives) were the only ones to identify specific contaminants that are being studied by researchers, suggesting that contaminants information is not retained by most locals.
- Talking about contaminants usually leads to discussions about the visual changes seen on the land due to climate change.
- Contaminants are not currently viewed as a threat to consuming country foods; several participants feel that Sachs Harbour is too far North to have yet received contaminated in their food.

Figure 1. Map of the northern Northwest Territories indicating Sachs Harbour with a red arrow.

Figure 2. Lena Wolki and Breanne Reinfott discuss sewing after an interview. She stated that ‘the pollution comes from down south, it’s in the air and gets into our fish, causing them to get skinny and unhealthy.’

Figure 3. (a) A film shoot in muskoxen, an important source of food for Inuvialuit; they are not thought to be ‘as contaminated’ as marine mammals. (b) Trevor Lucas waits for calm muskox to film.

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References:

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Figure 3. (a) A film shoot of muskoxen, an important source of food for Inuvialuit, they are not thought to be ‘as contaminated’ as marine mammals. (b) Trevor Lucas waits for calm muskox to film.