

The Ashkui Project Symposium

Knowledge, Culture and the Innu Landscape



A multidisciplinary symposium sponsored by

The Gorsebrook Research Institute,
the Innu Nation, and Environment Canada.

Held in conjunction with the Canadian Polar Commission

January 25, 2001

In association with

*The Arctic Research Committee, Saint Mary's University &
The Treaty and Aboriginal Rights Research Centre, Truro NS.*

This symposium brings together Innu elders and leaders, and academic and government researchers who have been involved in the "Labrador project". The project is a multidisciplinary, collaborative study of the landscape of Nitassinan (Labrador) as known to the Innu. The objective is to use a variety of methods, from Innu knowledge, science and social science, to gain a broad understanding of the ecology of Labrador and its significance to the people who live there. The work to date has focused on areas known as "ashkui" and serves as a case study for research that begins with Innu categorizations of space. These elements of the landscape are the focus of the various research partners.

Ashkui are areas of early or permanent open water on rivers, lakes and estuaries. Contemporary Innu camps are often found close to ashkui. Oral history and archeological evidence suggests this has been the case for many generations. Ashkui are part of the cultural landscape in that Innu know about them in great detail from multigenerational and personal experiences of living with and from the land. From a biophysical perspective ashkui are multifaceted processes and terrestrial/aquatic features. A multidisciplinary approach to ashkui must bridge the biophysical and cultural dimensions of the landscape if the perspectives of Innu, scientists and social scientists are to be mutually coherent. The symposium addresses the specifics of the work done to date and broader issues in which the work takes place. The latter include the appropriate conduct of science in aboriginal communities, the articulation of Western and Indigenous knowledge systems, and the place of cultural perspective in understanding environmental change.

The symposium builds on project based research conducted by government and academic researchers in conjunction with Innu in Labrador. It also draws from an "in-country" meeting held in May 2000 at Seal Lake. At this meeting project partners met with Innu elders to discuss research results and to work towards building new and mutually pertinent research questions. The symposium thus presents an opportunity to build on that experience, summarize the work to date and develop a coherent research agenda for the future.

Most of the papers will be drawn from research on ashkui. However, two speakers not involved with the project will give keynote addresses that contextualize the project work by contrasting it with ideas and practices elsewhere in the country. They have been asked to consider their presentations in light of the following: How does the Labrador Project approach fit in with other projects taking place across the country? Where does Indigenous philosophy intersect with scientific practice? How are the cultural histories of different aboriginal peoples embodied in the landscape they live in?