

The Honourable Harvest: *An Indigenous Research Protocol*

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Purpose of “The Honourable Harvest” Indigenous Research Protocol

In September 2017, Neechi Commons Ltd., partnered with Tabitha Robin (PhD student in Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Manitoba) to collaborate on a project to be designed by students in the Master's in Development Practice: Indigenous Development program at the University of Winnipeg. The purpose of this project was to provide students with an opportunity to utilize their skills as researchers to design a framework for ethical and responsible research practices to the Neechi Commons community.¹

The “*The Honourable Harvest*” *Indigenous Research Protocol* utilizes the teachings of Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer, a mother, plant ecologist, writer, and Distinguished Teaching Professor of Environmental Biology at the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry in Syracuse, New York.² “Dr. Kimmerer is the founding director of the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment, whose mission is to create programs that draw on the wisdom of both indigenous and scientific knowledge for our shared concerns for Mother Earth”.³ Her interests include not only restoration of ecological communities, but restoration of our relationships to land.⁴ We have applied Dr. Kimmerer’s TedXSitka Talk, “Reclaiming the Honourable Harvest” to a research context, using her “Honourable Harvest” protocol steps to inform our Indigenous Research Protocol.⁵

It is our belief that the interactions we engage in as researchers are more than just research; they are pivotal in the development and maintenance of relationships. These relationships will be built on the *Four R*’s of research: respect, relevance reciprocity, and responsibility.⁶ Through this lens, individuals will begin to view their work as contributing to community development and less of a research focus, topic, or subject. Furthermore, in entering this research relationship, there is an expectation that you will also be a contributing member of this community and must abide by the their ethics and values.

Neechi Commons & “The Honourable Harvest”

Neechi Commons Ltd. is an Indigenous owned and operated worker co-operative that is a staple of Winnipeg’s North End. It is a community business complex, which includes a neighbourhood supermarket, restaurant and catering service, an arts store, and various meeting space.⁷ Neechi Commons is a leader of Indigenous business and its commitment to making

¹Robin, T. Indigenous Research Methods Syllabus. (2017). University of Winnipeg.

² College of Environmental Science and Forestry. (2018). Robin W. Kimmerer Distinguished Teaching Professor and Director, Center for Native Peoples and the Environment. Retrieved from: <http://www.esf.edu/faculty/kimmerer/>

³ Center for Humans & Nature. (n.d.). Robin Wall Kimmerer Distinguished Teaching Professor of Environmental Biology – SUNY. Retrieved from: <https://www.humansandnature.org/robin-wall-kimmerer>

⁵ Kimmerer Wall, R. (2012). “Reclaiming the Honourable Harvest”. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lz1vgfZ3etE> American Indian Education, 30(3): 1-15.

⁶ Kirkness, V.J. & Barnhardt, R. (1991). First Nations and Higher Education: The Four R’s – Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, Responsibility. Journal of American Indian Education, 30(3): 1-15.

⁷ Neechi Commons. (2017). About Neechi Commons. Retrieved from: <https://neechi.ca/about/>

positive contributions to people and the planet is recognized by its Green Globe certification.⁸ It has implemented award-winning diabetes prevention campaigns, and its worker co-op structure is a unique feature of its social enterprise.⁹

The aforementioned initiatives are just some of the many aspects of Neechi Commons which make it a sought-after location for research purposes. While the interest of the academic community is appreciated and supported by Neechi Commons, unfortunately, very few partnerships have been conducted in a respectful manner. During consultations with Neechi Commons, it was expressed that a research protocol outlining the community's values, goals, and expectations would be beneficial. Thus, a methodology outlining best practices for both the community and the researcher was designed to ensure that all individuals involved will pursue their projects in a good way. The result was the creation of "*The Honourable Harvest*" *Indigenous Research Protocol* which ensures Neechi Commons can continue to nurture the community, exercise its self-determination, and protect its knowledge. This protocol is based on Indigenous epistemology that aligns with Neechi Commons' values but can also be widely applied to conducting research in any community.

The Neechi Commons community is built on and around food. From their local fruits and vegetables, neighbourhood supermarket, bannock bakery, ethnic foods, fish market, cafeteria and restaurant, to their 40-square foot community garden, they have a deep connection to the land and its gifts.¹⁰ One may envision Neechi Commons as a rich meadow of gifts – from the food, to its community members, to its various departments, or its role as a community hub, these gifts are all inherent to Neechi Commons and are responsible for its fruitful, long-standing connection to the land and peoples and the success of its work.

However, Neechi commons is a meadow where one cannot carelessly extract what they may need without regard for the land or the gifts – these are not commodities ripe for the taking. Rather, one must engage in "*The Honourable Harvest*", learning from tradition on how to respectfully approach our community meadow, develop a relationship with the community, and how to "Be Grateful and Give Thanks."¹¹

As defined by Dr. Kimmerer, "*The Honourable Harvest* is a practice both ancient and urgent, applies to every exchange between people and the Earth," or in this case, researcher and community¹². "It is a set of protocols that governs our taking, so that the world remains as rich for the seventh generation to come as it is for us today."¹³ Currently, we live in a world

⁸ Neechi Commons. (2012). Neechi Foods Co-Op Ltd. Retrieved from: <https://neechifoods.files.wordpress.com/2010/12/brochure-feb-2012.pdf>

⁹ The Canadian Community Economic Development (CED) Network. (n.d.) Neechi Foods Co-op Ltd. (Operates Neechi Foods Community Store). Retrieved from: https://ccednet-rcdec.ca/sites/ccednet-rcdec.ca/files/ccednet/Profile_-_Neechi_Foods_Cox.pdf

¹⁰ Neechi Commons. (2017). About Neechi Commons.

¹¹ Kimmerer Wall, R. (2012). "Reclaiming the Honourable Harvest".

¹² Kimmerer, R. (2015). The Honorable Harvest: Lessons From an Indigenous Tradition of Giving Thanks. Yes! Magazine. Referenced from: <http://www.yesmagazine.org/issues/good-health/the-honorable-harvest-lessons-from-an-indigenous-tradition-of-giving-thanks-20151126>

¹³ Kimmerer, R. (2015). The Honorable Harvest: Lessons From an Indigenous Tradition of Giving Thanks.

made of gifts but find ourselves harnessed to institutions and an economy that relentlessly ask, “What more can we take from the Earth?”¹⁴

“If we understand the Earth as just a collection of objects, then apples and the land that offers them fall outside our circle of moral consideration. We tell ourselves that we can use them however we please, because their lives don’t matter. But in a worldview that understands them as persons, their lives matter very much. Recognition of personhood does not mean that we don’t consume, but that we are accountable for the lives that we take. When we speak of the living world as kin, we also are called to act in new ways, so that when we take those lives, we must do it in such a way that brings honor to the life that is taken and honor to the ones receiving it.”¹⁵

Dr. Kimmerer’s perspectives on harvesting the earth can easily be adapted to the harvesting of knowledge from Neechi Commons or any community; the people and knowledge are not just subjects or data, and they are not simply assets, resources, or commodities. They are unique community members with personhood, and the knowledge and wisdom of the community provides life-giving well-being and independence. When building a relationship with the community and conducting research, we request that you don’t ask what can be learned or taken away from the community, but rather, what can you contribute to the community and how you can conduct your research in a manner that is respectful and reciprocal.

“The Honourable Harvest” Indigenous Research Protocol

The following steps have been adapted from Dr. Kimmerer’s TedXSitka presentation, “Reclaiming the Honourable Harvest”, to create the framework for a research protocol to be used by community organizations.¹⁶

Step 1: What Are You Bringing to Our Table?

Research should always be reciprocal, and the researcher should always avoid extracting knowledge from communities and individuals at their own benefit, without considering how their subjects can also become empowered through the work, or how communities might want their knowledge protected and honoured. The research relationship should be formed much like any other - how do our interests align? Are our intentions honourable? How willing are we to protect and nurture this relationship?

When approaching a community or individual for the purposes of research, the researcher should have already done the necessary work to establish their positionality and consider how power dynamics may play into their work. For some, this may look like stating who your family is and where you are from, for others this may be the application of a feminist or anti-oppressive lens wherein the researcher outlines their identity. Ask yourself, which aspects of your experience have contributed to your role as a researcher? Are there any labels or communities

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Kimmerer Wall, R. (2012). Reclaiming the Honourable Harvest.

that you are a part of, where identifying as such could help the community determine if developing a relationship around research is appropriate? Who are you affiliated with, on a personal, political, or academic level? Do you hold any moral or internal biases that could contribute to, or inhibit your ability to complete this research in a respectful manner?

Recommended reading for this process is the book *Kaandossiwin: How We Come to Know* by Kathleen E. Absolon. This text will take the researcher through their own journey to determine their position within the world and how they came to exist and work within it. It may also be necessary to accompany research inquiries with references relevant to your research project (this could mean a professor or teacher, research organization, government, or past/current community partnerships). If you have established respectful and reciprocal relationships in your past work and life, these efforts will not go unnoticed (and alternatively, if your past work has resulted in negative outcomes and/or disrespectful use of knowledge, these instances will also not go unnoticed).

Step 2: Setting the Table

In extension to setting your own personal positionality, determining the goal and purpose of your research prior to connecting with communities or individuals can help focus the intent, and allow the community in question to decide whether or not it is in their best interest to participate. Furthermore, the self-determination of the community is key in establishing a healthy, respectful relationship, so the researcher should allow for space to have their research question critique and their methods altered based on the needs and interests of the community/individuals.

Research proposals should include methodologies which consider the *Four R's* of Indigenous research: *respect, relevance reciprocity, and responsibility*. Research proposals should include consideration for the time and labour contributed by communities/individual(s). How will engaging in your project be a mutually beneficial for you and the community/individual(s)? How will you pay for the cost of labour (whether visible or invisible) contributed by the community/individual(s)? How will you ensure that the knowledge shared with you will be utilized in a respectful manner, which does not capitalize from the contributions of the community/individual(s)?

What is the timeline for your project? Have you reserved an appropriate amount of time to build a respectful relationship with the community/individual(s) that you wish to engage? What will come of the knowledge that is shared with you, once the project is complete? How can your subjects and partners be assured that the knowledge that is shared with the researcher will be shared and implemented in a respectful manner?

Step 3: "Never Take the First"

Many research inquiries are posed to communities without consideration of the time and labour it takes away from the roles, responsibilities, and obligations of the community/individual(s). It is crucial to determine if the community in question is the right fit for your research project before inquiring. Have you considered all options for research partnerships before coming to your conclusion? Have you investigated past research that has been published about the community or your research topic before voicing your inquiry? Has the question you are posing already been answered? If so, how will your work reaffirm, refute, or otherwise remain relevant to the community?

Step 4: “Listen for the Answer”

As a researcher, it is crucial to listen carefully throughout the research process. One should be cognizant that there are ways to listen beyond simply hearing the explicit words from a participant.¹⁷ When interacting with any member of community, pay attention to body language and other social cues to ensure that individuals feel comfortable in the research situation.

Patience is key: take your time when conducting interviews or using any other research methods to ensure that the community/individual(s) has full understanding of the purpose of your questions. Always be respectful; do not push when an individual feels uncomfortable answering a question or has not given you the answer you desire.¹⁸

Margaret Kovach’s *Conversation Method in Indigenous Research*, published in *The First Peoples Child and Family Review* (2010) is recommended reading for the technique of conversational interviews. Conversational interviews are based on the conversational method which stems from Indigenous methods of gathering knowledge, namely oral storytelling.¹⁹ Conversational interviews are often more informal, less structured and focus more on sharing through anecdotes and stories as a method of gathering information.²⁰

Step 5: “Take Only What You Need” or What is Given

This step displays a stark difference between Western and Indigenous ideals: Western ideals often dictate that it is beneficial to take everything you possibly can regardless of consent or necessity.²¹ These actions are based in capitalist pursuits of power, i.e. to collect resources (including knowledge) in the pursuit of profit - these ideals go against Indigenous Ways of Being which encourage an individual to only take what is needed or what is given.

As a researcher, you are aware that the research process can be taxing at times, but it is important to remember that this not only affects you, but has the ability to affect the community/individual(s) as well. As with *Step 4* above, do not seek further responses if you did not receive a desired answer. Take what you have been given and use it to the best of your ability.²² Do not take advantage of the kindness of the members of the community who are participating in your research. Allow individuals to provide you with the information in such a way that makes them comfortable. If there are certain subjects individuals do not wish to discuss, kindly move on to something else. It is important to always be aware of the needs and desires of those involved.²³

Step 6: “Minimize Harm”

¹⁷ Kimmerer, R. (2012). Reclaiming the Honorable Harvest. TEDxSitka. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lz1vgfZ3etE>

¹⁸ Kovach, M. (2010). Conversation Method in Indigenous Research. *The First Peoples Child and Family Review*. 5:1.

¹⁹ Kovach, M (2010). Conversation Method in Indigenous Research.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Kimmerer, R. (2012). Reclaiming the Honorable Harvest.

²² Assembly of First Nations [AFN]. (2009). Ethics in First Nations Research. Retrieved from: http://www.afn.ca/uploads/files/rp-research_ethics_final.pdf

²³ Assembly of First Nations [AFN]. (2009). Ethics in First Nations Research.

In order to minimize harm, the researcher must ensure there is ongoing communication and understanding between all partners. It is important that control of the research responses remains solely in the hands of the community prior to public dissemination.²⁴ Before any knowledge shared by the community in question is published or shared to a third party, the researcher must request approval with the possibility of revision or redaction.

Before writing or printing anything, consider the impact it will have on the community. The end result of your research should benefit you as a researcher as well as the community who has participated in your research.²⁵ Consider the implications of your work and ensure that you are not bringing any undue harm to the community in the way you are using the information you have obtained.

In short, remember this quote from Robin Kimmerer (2012); “Do not use a shovel where a digging stick will do.”

Step 7: “Ask Permission”

Article 19 of The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) states the following: “States shall consult and cooperate in good faith with the Indigenous Peoples concerned through their own representative institutions in order to obtain their free, prior and informed consent before adopting and implementing legislative or administrative measures that may affect them.”²⁶

As a researcher, it is crucial that you are able to position yourself, your research and the intentions of the work you are undergoing in the process of obtaining individual or collective free, prior and informed consent from potential participants in your research. It is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that they follow ethical guidelines and protocols throughout their research and make themselves aware of the role western research methodology and procedures have infringed on individual and collective Indigenous rights. This means that you are obligated to understand the complexities of navigating the Western research methodological paradigms while undergoing research with Indigenous people and their communities or knowledge systems. Consideration of specific individuals and collective protocols to establish respectful and reciprocal relationships must be done in a way that establishes a recognition of the visions, intent, expectations and informed consent between the researcher and community.

Ensure that participants you recruit understand the purpose, direction and utilization of the knowledge you are harvesting from the community. When asking for permission it is important to consider your approaches when seeking consent from participants. Are your consent forms full of academic or legal jargon? Did you ask participants in a way that respects their right to refuse? Do you have an awareness and understanding of how to employ Nation specific research ethics such as the First Nations Ownership, Control, Access and Possession (OCAP) Principles? Ensure that you are doing your personal research to understand how to

²⁴ First Nations Information Governance Centre. (2017) The First Nations Principles of OCAP.

²⁵ Carlson, E. (2017) Anti-colonial methodologies and practices for settler colonial studies. *Settler Colonial Studies*. 7:4, 496-517.

²⁶ United Nations (2007). United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Retrieved from: http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf

approach your project in a way that is respectful to the spirit by clarifying and being upfront of your intentions and regard for the knowledge and the people you want to include.

Step 8: “Be Grateful and Give Thanks”

How often are reports written only to never be heard of ever again, perhaps placed on the desk of a policy maker only to gather dust. Within both research and community development, it is common for completed projects to only be shared within academic or professional circles – often the communities involved never see the final result, or the outcomes of the researcher’s findings. Historically, researchers have conducted research with little to no benefit, accountability, or transparency in their relationships with Indigenous communities, which is evident from Maori Scholar, Linda TuhiWai Smith’s statement that;

“It galls us that Western researchers and intellectuals can assume to know all that it is possible to know of us, on the basis of their brief encounters with some of us. It appalls us that the West can desire, extract and claim ownership of our ways of knowing, our imagery the things we create and produce and then simultaneously reject the people who created and developed those ideas and seek to deny them further opportunities to be creators of their own culture and own nations.”²⁷

“*The Honourable Harvest*” asks the researcher to work within a state of gratitude of reciprocity, considering the benefits they’ve received from the communities who choose to share with them – and even further, considering how they can return the favor. Do not design an inconsiderate/harmful process of extracting knowledge from communities to benefit your own career or success - what are you doing to provide your set of knowledge and skills towards positive influences of individuals or communities? Consider these questions: How will you give back to the community for the time, efforts and knowledge you have gained for your research? How will you ensure that individuals in your research are honoured for the time, knowledge, experience and support they are providing to you by participating in your research? How will your presence and/or research benefit the community?

Step 9: “Share What You’ve Taken”

It is vital for the researcher to work from a place of respect, as outlined in the *Four R’s* of Indigenous research - how will you ensure that the community fully understands how and where you will be sharing the information and data that you are harvesting from the community? It is important for researchers to ensure there are direct lines of communication open throughout the many stages of developing, interpreting, revising, finalizing, and presenting your research.

Responsibility for the interpretation of the data falls largely upon the researcher. It is also the responsibility of the researcher to protect the integrity of the community and people included in your research. At times the true intent and meaning of what participants shared in your research may be obscured through the researcher’s interpretations. This can be avoided by providing participants with drafts of how you have evaluated and interpreted the data gathered, in order to ensure that the community has an opportunity to correct, clarify, or edit, if they feel it is needed.

²⁷ Tuhiwai Smith, Linda. (2012). *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, second edition. Zed Books Ltd.

After preparation of the knowledge you have harvested from the community, remember to provide a final product of the research. It is also imperative to seek free, prior and informed consent of the community before beginning any future publications or presentations where you would be sharing data that is owned by the community. Allow participants the opportunity to be aware of the information that is being disseminated and presented to the world about them, their families or communities.

Conclusion

This protocol was developed in order to guide the formation of research partnerships based on respect, relevance reciprocity, and responsibility between institutions and the community. The intention of the protocol is to guide all those involved in the research relationship so that positive outcomes may be achieved. “The Honourable Harvest” model was chosen in order to create a framework that is grounded in Indigenous research methodologies while also explaining protocol processes in plain language so that all researchers may learn and understand how to pursue their work in a good way. The resulting protocol is a marriage of traditional ways of seeking knowledge and acknowledgement of contemporary academic processes. It is crucial to recognize that not everyone has access to traditional knowledge and that it may be difficult to properly implement traditional protocols within an academic context. We hope that “*The Honourable Harvest*” *Indigenous Research Protocol* will provide guidance to researchers and the communities they are working with as they pursue their learning journeys together.

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