

The National EPA-Tribal Science Council
Traditional Ecological Knowledge Workshop – June 2013

EPA Caucus Report Out

Purpose and Background

This document provides an overview of key messages, concepts and questions that were heard by National EPA-Tribal Science Council (TSC) EPA Caucus members who attended the TSC's, Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) Training Workshop, held June 18-20, 2013, in Syracuse, NY. The workshop was co-hosted by the Onondaga Nation and the State University of New York, College of Environmental Science and Forestry's Center for Native Peoples and the Environment. In-depth presentations and discussions by tribes, tribal elders, federal agencies, and Tribal Colleges and Universities demonstrated and provided an overview of current uses of TEK that specifically focused on climate change, environmental decision-making, and tribal agriculture and subsistence practices.

In May 2011, the TSC launched a process to identify priority science issues of national significance. TEK and Climate Change were selected as national tribal priorities. In support of providing members a better understanding of TEK, the TSC facilitated a training workshop on TEK in June 2013. The TSC proposed the workshop as a critical next step in the process of implementing TEK as a national tribal priority¹.

Key Messages and Concepts

- Respect of tribal sovereignty should be a key element when discussing TEK.
- Several definitions of TEK were presented, including the description that TEK is a collective knowledge-based system that emerges from cultural values, beliefs, knowledge, and practices, and is viewed as a unique scientific approach within each tribe.
- TEK is the acquisition and accumulation of knowledge that emerges from the people, land and natural resources.
- TEK often includes forms of empirical research and observational experimentation.
- TEK can be described as an approach to knowledge generation and is as valid as western science for many purposes.
- Dr. Robin Kimmerer, Director, Center for Native Peoples and the Environment at the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry, described how TEK is a major focus of their curriculum, and highlighted research on the contributions of indigenous knowledge to scientific efforts for forest management and eco-cultural restoration of the Onondaga Lake watershed.

¹ For more information, please see the TSC's priority issue paper, *Integration of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) in Environmental Science, Policy and Decision-Making* at:
http://epa.gov/osp/tribes/pdf/Integration_TEK_EnvironmentalSciencePolicyDecisionMaking%20Tribal%20Priority_Final.pdf

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Key Messages and Concepts – continued

- It was proposed that EPA should not attempt to define TEK by EPA's current scientific standards.
- Legal and privacy issues, such as the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) rules and intellectual property rights, were discussed.
- It was suggested that the EPA should not attempt to interpret or use traditional knowledge without the leadership and guidance of tribal officials.
- When information sharing takes place between the tribes and EPA, it is important to produce a collective method of decision-making, analysis and evaluation.
- Several EPA programs have examples of the use of TEK to assist with programmatic decision making.

Key Questions

- Are there steps that EPA can take to incorporate the more holistic view of environmental issues reflected in TEK into our regulatory processes?
- How do tribal regulations, on reservation lands, that use TEK affect entities outside of reservation lands (e.g., point sources of air and water pollution)?
- Could the use of TEK provide advantageous solutions in adversarial environmental regulatory situations?
- How do the FOIA and intellectual property rights rules affect the use of TEK in environmental decision making processes?
- How feasible is it to try and integrate TEK into federal legal and regulatory processes, knowing there are documentation and proprietary data, issues and questions that are unresolved?

Proposed Next Steps

Short Term:

- Continue to draft key messages and questions for internal use and education to EPA management and staff.
- Provide a report out to the National Tribal Operations Committee (NTOC), at their next meeting, summarizing key messages, concepts and questions heard at the workshop.

Long Term:

- Investigate and respond to the TSC's Tribal Caucus' recommendations.
- Work with EPA's Office of International and Tribal Affairs to build a conduit for communication within the Agency.
- Commit to work with other Federal Agencies in the preparation of TEK communication mechanisms.