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Mitho Pimachesowin through Economic Development

Participation in the Traditional Economy in Northern Saskatchewan: The 21st Century Landscape

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Abstract: This article discusses the resilience of the northern traditional economy. In northern Saskatchewan *mitho-pimachesowin* speaks to the freedom and capacity to make a good living. For northern Indigenous People, this includes participation in the traditional economy that reflects their culture, identity, and way of life. Most still blend their land-based livelihood activities (harvesting, trapping, commercial fishing) and other forms of revenue income to support their families and communities. This blended approach is an example of sustainable development that works, and it should be supported by all levels of government with strategic approaches and investments. This article is a chapter in the open textbook *Indigenous Self-Determination through Mitho Pimachesowin (Ability to Make a Good Living)* developed for the University of Saskatchewan course Indigenous Studies 410/810, and hosted by the *Northern Review*.

Introduction

This article argues that the federal and provincial governments need to support and invest in the traditional market sectors (commercial fishing and trapping) of Northern Saskatchewan through long-term strategic incentives and subsidies to ensure the region's overall sustainable development. Northern Indigenous people and their governments are not static, and while they are increasingly engaging in economic partnerships with industry, they also remain protective of their traditional lifestyles. It is a blended way of life, not an either-or situation. Research findings suggest that the northern Indigenous traditional economy is still resilient and continues to make significant contributions toward protecting a northern way of life with its conservation and ecological knowledge and economic benefits (Beatty et al., 2013).

The northern blended economy is characterized by Indigenous subsistence activities (food production) and local industry (commercial fishing, trapping, and wild rice harvesting). Northern Saskatchewan is also a smaller regional economy and support from governments is limited (Beatty et al., 2013). Indigenous producers continue to face many fiscal and regulatory challenges (Beatty et al., 2013); nonetheless, many still practice their traditional livelihoods. Their resilience lies in an inward zeal to protect their homelands, their identity, sustainable food sources, and their spiritual, cultural, and economic way of life. I recall my late dad saying many times, “if you are worried and stressed, go out on the land for a while and you will get better” (O. Beatty, n.d.)—thus referring to the importance of overall health and wellness for economic well-being.

This article discusses some research findings that illustrate the resilience of the northern traditional economy, something that Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Holders have known all along, and what others have noted (Winther, 2016; Rusic, 1978). It begins with a brief discussion of the northern traditional economy to set the contextual background. The article then briefly introduces the research and summarizes its key findings with respect to the main indicators of participation in the traditional economy to help characterize the northern traditional economy and discuss its ongoing significance. It concludes with recommendations for informing both policy and further research.

Northern Traditional Economy

The interactions between Indigenous Peoples and the early fur traders resulted in stereotypical images of northern trappers, hunters, and fishers struggling in a subsistence and emerging market economy. Thanks to misrepresentations of Canadian history, First Nations Peoples have been portrayed as primitive (Cardinal

& Hildebrandt, 2000, p. 3), and certainly not considered on the slate of Canada's “founding fathers.” Indigenous Peoples and their traditional economies were not primitive, of course, and they did not lead lives of poverty and perpetual hardships (Coates et al., 1992, p. 20). Their economic livelihood what the northern Cree refer to as “Pimacihowin,” an economic, spiritual, and cultural way of life (Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000, p. 43). This term can be both a noun and a verb denoting purposeful production activities and journeys made in making a livelihood. In their own history, First Nations Elders attribute everything to the Creator that placed them on the lands of North America to make a good way of life, to share and live in peace (Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000, p. 5). Treaties with Europeans were considered mechanisms towards cementing good relations and sharing (p. 7).

Colonial government expansionism and racism against Indigenous Peoples resulted in an erasure and devaluing of treaty arrangements for centuries—the epic clash of values underlying this also subsequently resulted in many atrocities involving people, their identities, and their land rights. Developments after the Second World War, along with successful legal and political challenges by Indigenous Peoples, led to many improvements through land claims settlements and recognition of Indigenous Rights (Beatty et al., 2013; Southcott & Irlbacher-Fox, 2009).

The contemporary Indigenous traditional economy that emerged from this colonial history was tattered, but not broken. According to Rusic's study (1978) of the James Bay Cree, the northern traditional Cree economy continued to reflect a blend of seasonal wage labour and bush economy, consisting largely of hunting and trapping in isolated areas (p. 4–6). However, larger economic changes have transformed the traditional economy into a vulnerable sector often overlooked by governments. Rusic notes that the traditional economy also tended to be overlooked by researchers who did not understand the economic value of subsistence activities and the labour and savings involved in food and harvesting production. The narrow view of economic development, predicated upon principles of wage income, “Indian–White relations,” and education, has often obscured the “close symbiosis” of the wage economy and subsistence harvesting, although many acknowledge the cultural significance of the traditional economy (Rusic, 1978, p. 7). A better description of the northern traditional economy is that of a mixed cash–subsistence (Holen et al. 2017, p. 89) or a blended economy, built upon principles of local control, self-determination, and partnerships.

A traditional economy remains a challenging life, but it is also what many northern Elders recount as a “good way of life” (Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000). It produced a bountiful land-based cultural and economic way of life where making a living was both autonomous and cooperative, and very reliant on kinship networks and personal ingenuity (Beatty et al., 2013). The exchange with the

external Western market system came early by way of the commercial trapping and fishing trades, not to mention taxes and regulations imposed by provincial and federal governments. The traditional economy was vulnerable, however, not only to the dictates of nature and weather, but also changing government policies, fluctuating market prices, and demographic changes. Today, making a living in Northern Saskatchewan—Pimachesowin in Woodland Cree or Pimachihowin or Pimâcihowin in Plains Cree (Cardinal and Hildebrandt, 2000, p. 43)—requires necessary engagement in both the wage and traditional economies to make ends meet, and the subsequent vulnerability of this way of life needs government support and incentives.

The Danish economist Gorm Winther (2016) has described the traditional economy as a Subarctic transfer economy (p. 5). He classifies three main systems in his analysis of northern regional economies (Arctic and Subarctic), where one of the sectors includes the Subarctic transfer economies of Nunavut and Greenland consisting of hunting, trapping, fishing, and reindeer herding (p. 5). Aside from the reindeer herding, this Subarctic transfer economy could very well describe Northern Saskatchewan. The extent to which the traditional economy contributes to the national GDP is often overlooked due to larger government transfers. Winther infers that the traditional economy should not be ignored given that harvested subsistence foods are healthier and can offer important substitution values by replacing the more expensive goods imported from southern Canada. This argument makes sense insofar as addressing the need to protect the traditional economy, food security, and northern Indigenous Peoples' access to their resources. In Saskatchewan, the traditional economy is an Aboriginal and treaty right, but governments still have much control and much more needs to be done (Beatty, 2019).² Elders believe that Treaties guarantee the right of First Nations livelihood and rights to the land and its resources (Cardinal and Hildebrandt, 2000, p. 46). It is also a cultural preference and one of affordability given the high costs of living and travelling in the North (Holen et al., 2017, pp. 95–96).

The cost of goods and services from southern Canada, especially healthy essential foods, are beyond most household budgets, often leading to food insecurity and related issues. Incentives, subsidies, and other support programs for hunters and trappers are one way of supporting traditional economies. There are precedents for these initiatives across the Far North. The Government of Nunavut, for example, provides support and incentive programs like the fur pricing program for its Indigenous trappers and hunters (“Nunavut to pay hunters more for sealskins furs,” 2015). The Nunavut Harvesters Support Program has estimated that it costs \$200 for a weekend hunting trip, an amount beyond the budget of many northern households (Holen et al., 2017, p. 104). The Moose Cree First Nation in Northern Ontario also has a harvesters subsidy program and a trapper’s

support program (Moose Cree First Nation, 2021). The James Bay Cree of Northern Quebec, through their land claims settlements, have had an income support program for nearly fifty years to help Cree trappers and hunters maintain their traditional way of life (Rusic, 1978).

In Saskatchewan, provincial governments have increasingly minimized their support over time, and the interaction and relations with Indigenous trappers and fishers is largely through enforcement of provincial regulations (Government of Saskatchewan, 2022). Northern commercial trappers and fishers have set up their own volunteer advocacy organizations to try to address the needs of their local economies. The Northern Saskatchewan Trappers Association, for example, has been around since the 1970s (Pattison & Findlay, 2010) and it continues to advocate for the supports needed for trappers to practise their northern traditional economy. The Saskatchewan Cooperative Fisheries Ltd. and other related groups likewise advocate for the northern commercial fishing industry.

Methodology

This article is based on data from a 2010–2012 Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) funded research project that explored how Aboriginal populations in Northern Saskatchewan engaged in community, cultural, and political processes (Beatty et al., 2013). A telephone survey was conducted in the northern administrative district of Saskatchewan and this was later followed up with youth focus group sessions in eleven northern communities. The focus group sessions provided greater context for the survey in general, and also added voice for the youth population (aged 18 to 24) that was underrepresented in the telephone survey. The survey was administered in English, Cree, and Dene. In total, 851 individuals completed the survey, including 161 Métis respondents and 338 First Nations respondents.

For the purposes of this article, only those parts of the research that highlight the extent to which the Indigenous traditional economy continues to be practised within Northern Saskatchewan are highlighted in Table 1 below (Beatty et al., 2013, p. 10).

Findings

Table 1 presents the broad summary data on survey items relating specifically to practices in the traditional economy. In particular, three indicators were used to measure respondents' participation in the traditional economy. The responses suggest a robust traditional economy in the North. People still frequently engage in outdoor harvesting activities. First, the survey asked respondents approximately

how many times they engaged in outdoor activities—such as hunting, trapping, fishing, or gathering wild roots and berries—in the past twelve months. In turn, respondents reported an annual average of 33.8 times they engaged in these traditional outdoor activities, or approximately three times per month over the course of a year. A second indicator to measure participation in the traditional economy is giving away or sharing traditional foods with others. The survey found that over 70% of respondents had engaged in this practice in the past year. Finally, the survey asked those respondents who self-identified as First Nations and Métis how important they felt it was for Aboriginal communities to maintain traditional ways of life; in response, the survey found that 84.4% of Indigenous respondents indicated that this was very important.

Table 1. Summary Statistics on Traditional Economy Activities in Northern Saskatchewan. Source: Beatty et al., 2013.

	Mean	n
1. In the past 12 months, approximately how many times have you engaged in outdoor activities such as hunting, trapping, fishing, or gathering wild roots or berries?	33.84*	840
	% Yes	n
2. In the past 12 months: did you give away or share with others traditional foods such as moose meat or fish?	72.2	851
	% very important	n
3. How important is it that Aboriginal communities maintain traditional ways of life?***	84.4	507

*S.D. 78.64. **Question 3 was asked on a four-point Likert Scale, ranging from 1 to 7, where 1 was not at all important and 4 was very important

A Closer View

Looking at the results a little more closely, responses by sex and gender suggest some variance but not extensively overall. When the three indicators of participation in the traditional economy were analyzed by gender, over the past year women hunted, trapped, fished, or picked mushrooms and berries an average of 26.4 times, and men participated in these activities an average of 43.2 times. There could be multiple reasons for this difference, but since women tend to be primary caregivers of family households, having little spare time would be an issue. Another factor could be the traditional male roles of hunting, fishing, and trapping to feed their families. This is a factor that is slowly changing as women engage in more traditional economic activities, not only for food, but also for social and economic support. Giving away or sharing traditional foods and sustaining the traditional ways of life is a common practice. About 68% of women responded that they gave away or shared traditional foods with others over the past year, while 77% of men gave away or shared traditional food. Finally, when asked about the importance for Aboriginal communities to maintain traditional ways of life, 88.2% of First Nation and Métis women indicated that it was very important, while 80% of First Nation and Métis men indicated that it was very important.

The level of education also suggests some differences amongst the three indicators of participation in the traditional economy, but not greatly overall. First, when respondents' engagement in outdoor activities was analyzed by level of education, it was revealed that respondents with some post-secondary education engaged the most often with an average of 40.4 times over the past year, followed by respondents with grade school/some high school education, who engaged an average of 38.7 times over the past year. Respondents who had completed secondary education engaged in outdoor activities an average of 37.6 times. Meanwhile, respondents with completed post-secondary education engaged the least amount at an average of 26.8 times over the past year, which again could be attributed to many factors including not having spare time to go out on the land.

Second, when asked if respondents gave away or shared traditional foods over the past year, respondents with grade school/some high school were most likely to engage in that practice (79.1%). Following this, 76.2% of respondents with some post-secondary education and 73.1% of respondents with completed post-secondary education reported that they had given away or shared traditional foods over the past year. Overall, most respondents in all categories gave away or shared traditional foods. As well, the survey found that over 80% of respondents, regardless of their level of education, responded that it was very important for Aboriginal communities to maintain their traditional ways of life.

When looking at the age factor, the three indicators measuring the respondents' participation in the traditional economy illustrated more commonalities. The respondents between 50 and 59 years of age engaged in traditional outdoor activities the greatest number of times at an average of 39 times over the past year. This was followed by respondents under 30 years of age who engaged in outdoor activities an average of 36 times over the past year, then respondents between the ages of 40 and 49 engaged in outdoor activities an average of 34.5 times over the past year. Respondents between 30 and 39 indicated their engagement in outdoor activities an average of 30 times over the past year. Finally, respondents over the age of 60 expressed their engagement in outdoor activities an average of 28.5 times over the past year.

Next, most respondents, regardless of age, reported that they gave away or shared traditional foods with others over the past year. Specifically, 78% of respondents under 30; 71.4% of respondents aged 30–39; 70.5% of respondents 40–49; 76% of respondents 50–59; and 66.4% of respondents over the age of 60 reported giving away or sharing traditional foods over the past year.

When First Nations and Métis respondents were further asked about their perceptions of the importance for Aboriginal communities to maintain traditional ways of life, close to 90% of respondents between the ages of 30–39 and 50–59 indicated this is very important. Of those respondents aged 40–49, 83% also perceived this to be very important, and 79% of respondents under 30 and over 60 perceived this to be very important.

The three indicators of participation in the traditional economy were then analyzed by respondents' self-reported employment status. It was found that self-employed respondents engaged in outdoor activities the most with an average of 54 times over the past year. Respondents who were employed part time at one job or employed at more than one job indicated engaging in outdoor activities an average of 50 times over the past year. Respondents who were employed full time at one job reported an average of 31 times over the past year, while respondents who were unemployed reported the lowest amount of engagement in outdoor activities with an average of 23 times over the past year. Again, while multiple factors were likely involved, this lower engagement by those reporting unemployment could reasonably be attributed to their inability to afford the costs of hunting, fishing, or trapping.

As far as giving away or sharing traditional foods, there was high participation across the spectrum (employed, self-employed, or unemployed) in this practice—82% of those respondents employed at more than one job, 75% of respondents who were self-employed, 74% of respondents who were unemployed, 70% of respondents who were employed full time at one job, and 69% of

respondents employed part time at one job, reported that they had given away or shared traditional foods over the past year.

Lastly, most of the respondents across the employment–unemployment spectrum responded that it was very important for Aboriginal communities to maintain their traditional ways of life. The survey found that over 80% of respondents who were employed full time at one job, employed at more than one job, self-employed, and unemployed, and 78% of respondents employed part time at one job indicated they found it very important for Aboriginal communities to maintain traditional ways of life.

Observations and Conclusion

Most Indigenous respondents displayed high levels of participation with the traditional economy in Northern Saskatchewan. Responses suggested a high level of sharing traditional foods and the majority considered it very important for Indigenous communities to maintain their traditional way of life.

There were some differences across the variables (gender, education, age, and employment) and one can only speculate to explain these due to the multiple factors at play. In the category of gender, for example, men appeared to participate in the traditional economy at higher rates in comparison to women. This could be attributed to women not having the resources nor the time to go out due to being primary caregivers for their children and families. Another factor could be culture, where the traditional role of men was to go out and make a living on the land for their families; but with changing social and economic challenges, this is also changing.

The age variable suggested the most commonalities overall, with the respondents aged 50 to 59 engaging in traditional outdoor activities the greatest number of times a year (35) and those aged 60+ reporting 29 times a year. The rest (aged under 30, 30–39, and 40–49) reported engagement in traditional activities in the mid-range (30–35 times a year).

The other more common variables of wage income and education suggest an attachment to the traditional economy regardless of wage income levels or education; however, there are also barriers. Time and cost issues are an example but may not necessarily be complementary. Those with completed post-secondary education reported lower engagement in outdoor activities than the others (grade school/some high school, completed secondary, and some post-secondary). Time may be an issue here. In terms of wage income, those reporting self-employed status suggested the highest levels of outdoor engagement (54 times over the year), and those reporting unemployed status suggested the lowest levels of participation (23 times over the year). This suggests that people want to engage in traditional activities and do so when they have sufficient resources and time.

The overall findings suggest what Rusic calls a “close symbiosis” (1978, p. 7) between the wage economy and subsistence harvesting, and this needs to be taken into consideration when discussing sustainable economic development. The research here and elsewhere suggests participation in the traditional economy is tied to the northern Indigenous culture, identity, and way of life. Most Indigenous northerners continue to rely upon traditional harvesting (commercial and subsistence) to supplement their overall household income and needs. However, the costs associated with time and getting things ready to engage in these traditional pursuits are increasing and consequently inhibiting engagement by those who need it most. The mixed cash–subsistence economy (Holen et al., 2017, p. 89) of Northern Saskatchewan remains an important component of sustainable development, and all levels of government need to support and invest in the traditional market sectors (commercial fishing, trapping) through long-term strategic incentives and subsidies.

Notes

1. Here, northern refers to the Northern Saskatchewan Administration District (NSAD) (Government of Saskatchewan, 2021).
2. The terms Aboriginal and Indigenous are broadly applied interchangeably here. The term Aboriginal is a constitutional term defining Aboriginal Peoples in Canada as being Indian, Inuit, and Métis (s. 35, Constitution Act, 1982), while previously, the term Indigenous Peoples was linked to more of a global scope. With UNDRIP (the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples), the term Indigenous is now being used to refer to issues both national and international.

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