



**Native Women's  
Association of Canada**



**L'Association des  
femmes autochtones  
du Canada**

**ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION and  
CLIMATE CHANGE OFFICE (ECCCO)**

**Conservation/Biodiversity for Indigenous  
Women, Girls, Gender-Diverse, and Two-Spirit  
People**

**NATIVE WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF CANADA**

**ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION and CLIMATE CHANGE OFFICE (ECCCO)**

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## **TOOLKIT INTRODUCTION**

### **Native Women's Association of Canada**

#### **Environmental Conservation and Climate Change Office**

The Native Women's Association of Canada's (NWAC) Environmental Conservation and Climate Change Office (ECCCO) will work to facilitate the sharing of conservation, traditional ecological knowledge, and climate change-related information among Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities across Canada.

#### **ECCCO Mandate**

ECCCO's mandate is to reclaim and strengthen the relationships that Indigenous women, girls, gender-diverse, and Two-Spirit people have with Mother Earth, her lands, waters, and wildlife. This will be achieved through the collection and sharing of knowledge, stories, and best practices related to the environmental impacts on Indigenous people, as informed by the experiences of grassroots Indigenous women, girls, gender-diverse, and Two-Spirit people. The goal of this work will be to promote cultural environmental awareness, encourage engagement in conservation and climate change action, and advocate for greater economic opportunities for Indigenous women, girls, gender-diverse, and Two-Spirit people in sustainable, low-carbon economic sectors.

#### **Conservation/Biodiversity for Indigenous Women, Girls, Gender-Diverse, and Two-Spirit People**

This toolkit is designed to share how communities, and specifically Indigenous women, make substantial contributions to global conservation and sustainable development efforts.

#### **Main Objectives**

The five main objectives are:

1. Build capacity and share knowledge on conservation and biodiversity for Indigenous women, girls, gender-diverse, and Two-Spirit people.
2. Enable Indigenous women's participation in better land use management practices within their territories.
3. Increase environmentally sustainable management across sectors.
4. Improve information about biodiversity ecosystem management by including the Indigenous women, girls, gender-diverse, and Two-Spirit lens.
5. Raise awareness of biodiversity and enable Indigenous women, girls, gender-diverse, and Two-Spirit people to participate in conservation efforts and at the community/regional/provincial and territorial/federal levels.

## Key Questions

1. In your experience do Indigenous women have a different relationship or knowledge base with nature than Indigenous men do? If this is the case, what are the differences and what are their distinct roles (e.g., the roles of Indigenous women water carriers versus men)?
2. In your opinion, do changes to the environment resulting from the impact of biodiversity loss due to climate change or human activity affect Indigenous women's knowledge regarding the environment? If yes, how does it affect their knowledge?
3. In your opinion, do changes to the environment resulting from the impact of biodiversity loss due to climate change or human activity affect Indigenous women's spiritual/cultural, physiological, dietary needs, and life-stage processes?
4. In your opinion, do changes to the environment resulting from the impact of biodiversity loss due to climate change or human activity affect Indigenous women's traditional economic activities (gathering, fishing, and hunting)?
5. In your opinion, do changes to the environment resulting from the impact of biodiversity loss due to climate change or human activity affect spiritual, cultural, and dietary practices?
6. In your opinion, do changes to the environment resulting from the impact of biodiversity loss due to climate change or human activity affect Indigenous women and Indigenous men differently? If yes, in what way do these changes affect Indigenous women differently from that of Indigenous men?

## Climate Change, Conservation, and Biodiversity

### Climate Change

Climate refers to a region's weather measured over a period of time (includes seasonal temperatures, rainfall averages, and wind patterns).

Climate change can cause weather to become unpredictable, resulting in damaging weather and farming difficulty. The main cause of climate change is human activity — for example, the use of fossil fuels is a main contributor to global warming.

### Conservation

Conservation is the planned use of our natural resources in the most efficient way. We require natural resources for our modern way of life either through industrial or non-consumptive uses. Conservation involves methods taken to protect biodiversity.

### Biodiversity

Biodiversity is the variety of every living thing on Earth — for example, humans, animals, insects, plants, fungi, and microbes.

## **First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Culture and Conservation/Biodiversity**

There is no one traditional knowledge for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people as a whole; this knowledge is as individual as each community. The cultural differences in Indigenous communities are a result of the culture itself being derived from the community's immediate surroundings and local natural resources.

Although there is no one culture that includes all First Nations, Inuit, and Métis beliefs and practices as a whole, biodiversity is at the core of every Indigenous community. All Indigenous traditional knowledge emphasizes the need to protect and care for the environment.

Preservation practices are equally important among First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities. Throughout history, Indigenous people have passed down the knowledge of thinking from generation to generation. Every practice involving the community's natural resources also included careful consideration on how to preserve for future use — up to seven generations ahead.

First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people have a very strong connection and relationship to the environment And a deep-rooted traditional knowledge of their natural resources, especially the women.

## First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Gender Roles

First Nations, Inuit, and Métis cultures share similar traditional knowledge when it comes to gender-specific roles within the community. These clearly defined gender roles contribute to the traditional knowledge that is passed down to the next generation. In this light, it is especially important that the perspective of women, girls, and gender-diverse people be considered.

**FEMALE**

VERSUS

**MALE**

**GENDER ROLES**



## Indigenous Women's Roles

Traditionally, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis women were given the roles of caretakers of the land and people, water carriers, and nation builders. Indigenous women tend to have more roles in their community than men, a fact that has resulted in Indigenous women being given more/different knowledge. As caretakers of the land, women possess more traditional knowledge about their environment in terms of conservation and wildlife practices.

Water carriers were charged with protecting the water — a role that has been passed to women over generations. Bound up in this role is specific knowledge on water ceremonies, which have been used to teach to other members of the community, as well as social practices involving water, water management, and society's relationship with water.

Indigenous women are caretakers of their people and historically held high positions of power within their community due to the amount of knowledge they possessed. Most decisions were made by female Elders and in many First Nations communities a decision could not be made without consulting the women.<sup>1</sup>

## Indigenous Men's Roles

In First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities, the men's roles were usually as warriors or protectors of the land and people. Since the men were often away from the communities for extended periods of time, the bulk of day-to-day tasks were left to the women. As the men had gender-specific roles, their skills and knowledge varied depending on the tasks for which they were responsible — in navigation, geography, weaponry, combat, infrastructure, and animal hunting.<sup>2</sup>

## Climate Change Impacts

Indigenous women, girls, gender-diverse, and Two-Spirit are disproportionately impacted by climate change. Given their traditional gender role as caretakers of their family and the land, they have been the primary users of natural resources.

Indigenous women are typically more knowledgeable about traditional food growing and preparation. Local resources are also used to supplement family diets (fishing, hunting, foraging, etc.) — more so in impoverished communities.

Traditional medicines are still widely used today in First Nations, Inuit, and Métis households. The medicinal knowledge is often held by Indigenous women and the use of

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<sup>1</sup> Roseanne Martin-Wysote, Senior Elder/Director. Personal interview conducted January 9, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Madeleine Condo, Resident Elder. Personal interview conducted January 9, 2020.

traditional medicines is used even more so within families living in poverty or with limited access to medical care. Aside from person use, traditional medicines also factor largely in ceremonial practices.

Social gatherings are also a large part of Indigenous culture; many of these gatherings revolve around food, animals, water, and plants. Common ceremonies that take place annually at specific times of the year are the corn ceremony, as well as bean, tobacco, strawberry, and naming ceremonies. Indigenous women keep track of, plan and oversee these social gatherings.

Climate change causes unpredictable weather patterns that disrupt the natural resources that Indigenous women rely on for their family's and community's survival and for the preservation of Indigenous culture.

## **Adaptation to Climate Change**

“Adaptation to climate change is any activity that reduces the negative impacts of climate change and/or takes advantage of new opportunities that may be presented” (What is adaptation? November 13, 2015).

Warmer temperatures in Inuvialuit communities are making it difficult to store traditional foods, changing water levels, contributing to an increase in biting insects, which causes additional health concerns, and changing animal migration patterns, which makes it more difficult to hunt. These climate impacts put even more strain on Indigenous women, who are forced to adapt or face food scarcity and an erosion of Indigenous culture. Members of the Inuvialuit settlement region are adapting to the impacts of climate change by initiating new drying and smoking techniques, using bottled water to avoid the increasing risk of contaminated water, and implementing community programs that help provide meat to endangered community members (Nickels et al., 2002) (see Table 3). In response to this concern, the Inuvialuit Community Economic Development Organization (ICEDO) has invested in an educational program and training facility centred on country food processing. This initiative will improve food security by raising awareness, developing skills, and developing new products.

Inuit communities are facing difficulties storing their country food as the warmer temperatures are causing traditional storage methods to spoil. Fishing is also becoming more difficult. These affect food security, as well as the local economy. Many local families rely on fishing as a food staple and for an income. As the temperatures continue to rise, the migration patterns of many sub-arctic fish begin to change as well. The rising temperatures also have an impact on transportation for many communities, as travelling by ice in some areas is the only way to access certain areas. The changes in weather make the ice more unpredictable and not as thick as it should be. In addition to transportation issues, this also leads to an increase in accidents due to thinner ice.



To help locals to prepare for specific impacts that can affect them, Climate Change Nunavut issues ice travel information and warnings, along with advice to plan ahead and have alternate travel routes. Rapid weather change impact information is shared, along with adaptation suggestions such as using GPS devices and keeping extreme weather provisions on hand in the home.

On a national level, the Government of Nunavut is developing projects to help Nunavummiut adapt to climate change impacts. Recent projects include developing community climate change action plans, training and employing community members in climate change projects, working with local Elders to utilize local traditional knowledge in planning processes, and creating materials to inform communities about climate change.

Elizabeth Azzuz (Yurok), who sits on the board of the Cultural Fire Management Council (CFMC), spoke to Indigenous Rights Radio's "Pathways from Science to Action: Indigenous Leaders Responding to Climate Change" segment on how climate change is causing wildfires on the Yurok and surrounding reserves, and how they use traditional knowledge to combat them. The CFMC teaches traditional controlled fire burning techniques in its Family Burn program to help decrease the number of wildfires the region has been experiencing. In partnership with surrounding reservations, traditional knowledge is being integrated into community training programs to instruct people on how to handle wildfires.

Jannine Staffansson (Saami) from the Arctic and Environment Unit of the Saami Council also spoke with Indigenous Rights Radio on how they are adapting their traditional knowledge to respond to climate change. Climate change is causing unusual rain in the winter, which creates ice over the ground. This is preventing reindeer from reaching the underlying moss. When a layer of ice covers the ground, the reindeer are either unable to smell the moss or to dig through the ice; they are forced to migrate elsewhere. Reindeer is a staple country food for local people. The locals claim they've never dealt with a scarcity of reindeer before and are having to innovatively adapt their traditional knowledge to prevent further migration. For example, the locals have found that castrating the male reindeers makes them much stronger and able to break through the layer of ice.

Given their strong relationship to the environment, Indigenous women are keen observers of changes that are occurring. The ability to detect changes along with their traditional local knowledge makes them invaluable to discussions and resource management strategies dealing with climate change adaptation. Their involvement is crucial.

## International Perspectives

Conservation International understands the importance of utilizing Indigenous and traditional people's knowledge for climate-related issues. This deep engagement only serves to increase an understanding of how Indigenous men and women interact with their environment — thus paving the way for the ability to develop culturally appropriate methods.

The Indigenous Leaders Conservation Fellowship is intended to elevate the local Indigenous voice in the areas of climate resilience and conservation. A specific example is the Indigenous Women's Fellowship, which was created to address the large gap in Indigenous women leadership, management, and decision-making. Conservation International recognizes that Indigenous women have a strong connection to their land, which gives them unique ecological knowledge that will benefit climate resilience.

MADRE: Fighting for Feminist Futures is a global grassroots movement organization that focuses on rural and Indigenous women issues in ending gender violence, advancing climate justice, and building a just and peaceful society. Within the 'advancing climate justice' stream, MADRE is focusing on supporting rural and Indigenous women's efforts to defend climate change adaptation programs and advocate for just economic and environmental policies.

While MADRE understands that Indigenous women are among the most impacted by climate change, it doesn't view women as victims but as part of the solution. In this context, the Indigenous woman's priorities, experiences, and knowledge can be utilized with the right grassroots solution.

MADRE works in three ways:

- **Grantmaking:** funding rural Indigenous women as key climate defenders, supporting women to develop community protections, and advocating for women in policy discussions
- **Capacity Building:** training their partners and building advocacy skills to ensure the gender perspective is strengthened in climate policy, facilitating activist exchanges, and mobilizing public education campaigns
- **Legal Advocacy:** bringing Indigenous women's demands to policy-making spaces, and advocating for the protection of land rights from war and corporate exploitation

## Recommendations

Indigenous communities and Indigenous women, girls, gender-diverse, and Two-Spirit people are vulnerable to climate change and biodiversity loss. The importance of Indigenous traditional knowledge, local perspectives, and adaptation techniques to counter the impacts of climate change and resulting biodiversity losses is now being internationally recognized.

Given that each First Nations, Inuit, and Métis community will have unique responses to local climate change impacts, solutions will need to be tailored to reflect the respective community. To achieve viable solutions on a local scale, local women and girls need to be consulted and engaged to help address each community's unique needs.

The Dene Nation's Denedeh Environmental Working Group (DEWG) is a good example of collecting local observations and traditional knowledge and working collaboratively on solutions. The DEWG has adopted a more focused research and programming approach to climate change. Workshops are held within each region of the working group, where participants share their observations about the impacts of climate change on their region and their local traditional knowledge. It is important for an organized working group to share the same goals and work together to protect traditional knowledge and adapt to climate change. To achieve this, locals need to be informed of recent climate change findings and trained to implement the programs that respond to unique circumstances and realities in their own communities. The opportunity to promote women, girls, gender-diverse, and Two-Spirit people in more leadership and management roles exists in this model — much like the capacity-building stream proposed by MADRE: Fighting for Feminist Futures.

The following areas of recommendations will enhance the ability of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities to adapt to climate change.

One key recommendation involves creating a grassroots approach that encompasses communicating with and learning from women and girls about their unique priorities. Such an approach can only be realized by conducting a 'local lens' analysis in specific regions to understand how communities, and women and girls, are being affected by climate change.

There needs to be a more comprehensive approach to consultation by government representatives. Currently, little consultation is taking place in communities. To ensure government representatives are conducting useful consultations, communities themselves need to implement a structured, standardized protocol. This protocol should include the following: What are the communities' unique climate change issues? How does this affect the land, water, wildlife, culture, and well-being of its people? What are the main issues that need to be addressed? Who should be designated to speak to government officials and why? What traditional knowledge needs to be conveyed to outside agencies to ensure the solutions are more inclusive of the culture? What are possible solutions that community

members can contribute to and what areas do they need help from outside agencies? This protocol will ensure communities are more prepared and that everyone is collectively involved in the consultation process. It also minimizes the chance of ineffective or inconclusive 'solutions' being offered by outside agencies.

Other recommendations include utilizing the expertise of local women and girls to enable region-specific traditional knowledge learning and participation; developing community indicators for monitoring climate change impacts; using the observations of local communities to identify unique needs for successful adaptation; providing economic support to facilitate adaptation; increasing the level of local engagement to facilitate programs, with a focus on engaging with women, girls, gender-diverse, and Two-Spirit people; and training to augment Indigenous capabilities to identify, monitor, and analyze climate change impacts.

## **Federal Program Resources**

### **1. Climate Change and Health Adaptation Program (Indigenous Services Canada)**

This program focuses on First Nations and Inuit communities' capacity-building by funding community-designed and -driven projects. These projects aim to help these communities adapt to the health impacts of climate change. The projects implement health-related action plans designed to increase knowledge-building, communication, and support to help adapt at the local, regional, and national level.

There are two streams in this program: Climate Change and Health Adaptation Program North (Yukon, Northwest Territories, Nunavut, Nunavik, and Nunatsiavut) and Climate Change and Health Adaptation Program South for First Nations South of 60°N (all First Nations south of 60°N).

<https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1536238477403/1536780059794>

### **2. Climate Change Preparedness in the North Program (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada)**

This program provides support in Yukon, Northwest Territories, Nunavut, Nunavik, and Nunatsiavut communities to help them adapt to the impacts of climate change. Funding is available for projects on vulnerability and risk assessment, development of hazard maps and adaptation plans/options, and non-structural and structural adaptation measures.

Non-structural measures include land management bylaws, community development plans, revision of procedures for snow management, and best practice development.

Structural measures include vulnerable/at-risk infrastructure upgrades and implementation of flood-proof and coastal erosion prevention standards.

<https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1481305554936/1481305574833>

### **3. Indigenous Community-Based Climate Monitoring Program (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada)**

This program provides funding for community-based and led projects that help Indigenous communities build capacity to monitor climate change impacts on traditional lands and waters.

This program also supports the co-application of Indigenous knowledge and science to enhance collaboration, as well as supports Indigenous participation in program oversight.

Eligible activities include community engagement, training community members, rental equipment, assessing/monitoring/communicating climate data, and networking.

<https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1509728370447/1509728402247>

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