

Connecting Inuit Elders and Youth: Learning about caribou, community, and well-being

*A research project and partnership between Carleton University, the Kitikmeot Inuit Association, and the community of Gjoa Haven, Nunavut
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For Inuit in the Arctic, connections between land and culture are fostered by inter-generational and experiential place-based learning. Only three to four generations ago, elders of today were living nomadically, following the seasonal rhythms of the land, oceans, and animals. Inuit culture and language are thus inextricably tied to place, as stories of places and journeys were woven into the social and cultural fabric of Inuit life. Through colonial practices of religious conversion, government intervention, permanent settlements, and formal education over the past 60 - 100 years, family connections to place were uprooted. In part, this resulted in the socio-economic challenges many arctic communities face today, with education, employment, health, and other social indicators being consistently below national average levels. To regain balance after such rapid social, cultural, political, economic, and (more recently) environmental changes, Inuit organizations and community groups are turning back to the land and sea to restore their relationships and cultural strength. In Gjoa Haven, Nunavut, a small Inuit community on King William Island, local elders want to share their knowledge and oral history. In the eve of their lifetime they want to pass on survival and language skills, as well as cultural values and practices, to the youth of the community. As such, they invited the development of this research project to focus on the relationships between caribou, community, and well-being, by exploring new approaches to community-driven research and education.

In the 2008 Nunavut Education Act, *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* (Inuit knowledge and cultural values) is incorporated as the guiding principles for developing curriculum. (Re)connecting elders and youth, and (re)considering what appropriate and meaningful education entails, are critical to these efforts. This means enhanced involvement of elders in traditional teaching roles, more place-based and experiential learning, and additional incorporation of Inuktitut language and northern content. This trend in northern education is also closely tied to shifts towards collaborative research with Inuit communities, reflecting new Indigenous research approaches based on respect, reciprocity, and accountable relationships.

This project emerged from a SSHRC-funded Research Development Initiative involving a research planning workshop in Gjoa Haven in February, 2010, with additional meetings and an elder-youth land camp in August, 2010. Acting on local community research priorities, the purpose of this project is to explore the value of elder-youth land camps as a means of fostering inter-generational knowledge transfer and conceptualizing Inuit research methodologies. Focusing on Inuit-caribou relationships in the context of changing northern lifestyles, this research will address concerns around: i) northern educational policy implementation; ii) the lack of caribou research on King William Island;

iii) community health and cultural implications of shifting Inuit-caribou relations; and, iv) culturally appropriate and respectful research and education relationships. Therefore, the objectives of this project are to investigate cross-cultural applications of Indigenous research methodologies, explore the role of place in northern education, Inuit identity, and human-animal relations, as well as understand how community-driven research and education can foster community health and prosperity. This case study will thus address community goals while informing broader debates around Indigenous and cultural geography theoretical approaches, Aboriginal identities, sustainable livelihoods, place-based education, wildlife management, and cultural knowledge transmission.

Questions, comments, or to get involved...contact:

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