

SPIRIT, SURVIVAL AND A STAND-OFF: STORYTELLING RESEARCH THROUGH VIDEO ANIMATION WITH YELLOW QUILL FIRST NATION

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WHY DID WE DO THIS RESEARCH?

Ācimowin (storytelling) is a long-standing approach to sharing knowledge in many Indigenous communities. The stories may focus on social, political and cultural events, practices and theories. Lessons are expressed through a variety of story genres, from humorous to deeply serious and spiritual. Indigenous storytelling involves expert use of context, imagery and vocal and body expression, including pitch, facial animation, plot and character development, and meticulous remembrance of the story.

Storytellers are held in high regard in many Indigenous nations. More recently, the erosion of lifestyle, culture, language, participation in a traditional economy and the degradation of land and water resources threaten the continuity of the storytelling tradition in Indigenous communities in Canada. The internet and other advances in technology also compete with the continuity of traditional stories for Indigenous youth. In particular, the widespread use of social media as a communications tool presents challenges to honouring Indigenous legacies with the same respect as face-to-face knowledge sharing.

In the past, research results on water issues in Indigenous communities were not routinely translated into formats, such as storytelling, that would convey relevant information to community members in culturally-appropriate ways. Instead, knowledge was published in academic journals which were inaccessible to community members. This style of communication was considered *Ogī kātōnāwā* (i.e., hidden or deceptive) and led to a lack of trust. In these reconciliatory times, academics are reflecting on their habits and realizing that a collaborative approach to co-production that relinquishes control over how results are communicated and used within communities are necessary for building long-term relationships. Researchers and Indigenous partners have also expressed a desire for processes that respect different kinds of knowledge.

In this project, we used a participatory process to create an animated storytelling video that depicted Elders' lived experiences of water in Yellow Quill First Nation (YQFN). We focused on the six "Rs" of research with Indigenous people: respect, relevance, reciprocity, responsibility, relationality and reconciliation (Castleden et al., 2017). We shared stories about the effective use of participatory processes across knowledge systems and made a lasting and important product for both community members and researchers. This project follows a Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) funded program examining water quality issues on First Nations reserves in Saskatchewan (2012-2016).

WHAT DID WE DO?



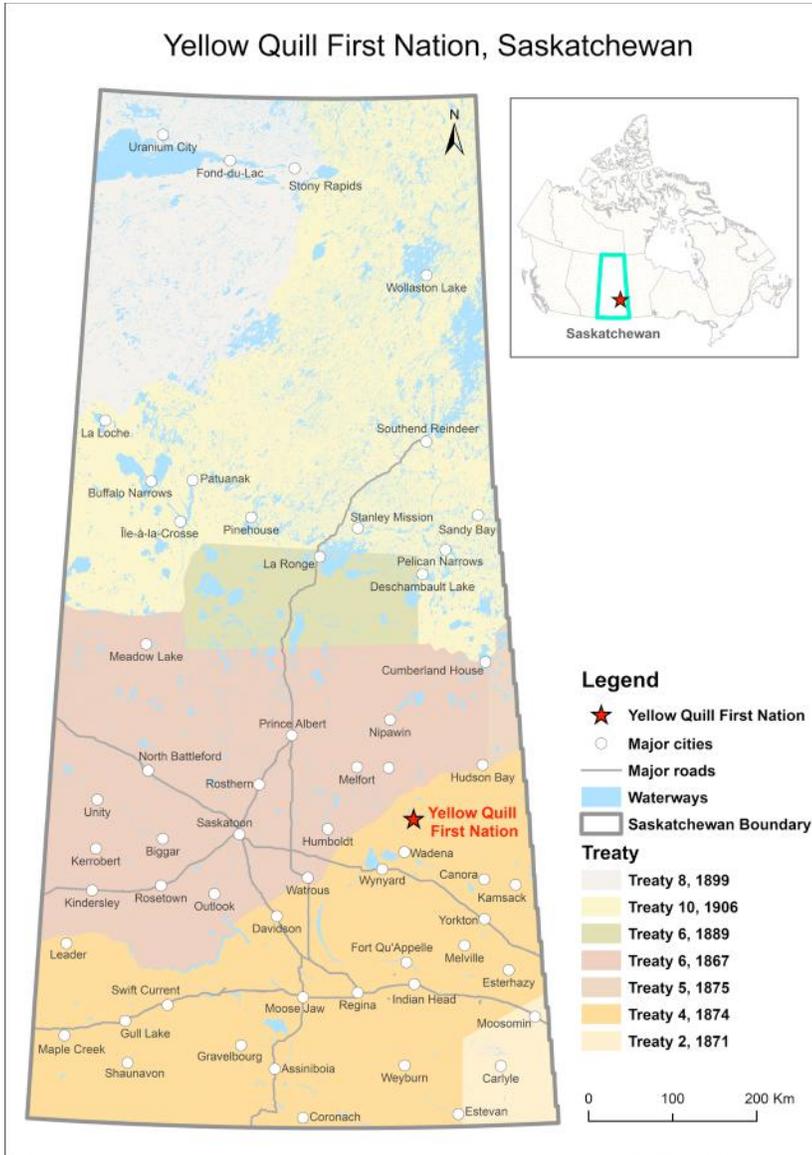
YQFN is a Saulteaux First Nation located approximately 300 km east of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan and is a signatory of Treaty No. 4, which was signed by Chief Yellow Quill on August 24, 1876. There are approximately 2800 registered band members; roughly 600 of these members reside on the reserve. Nut Lake is at the centre of the main reserve and provides water, fish, plants, animals, medicines and other resources for sustaining the community's health, spiritual practices and traditions.

During earlier CIHR-funded research, interviews were conducted from 2012 to 2016 with 22 Elders in YQFN about their lived experiences with water. Elders from YQFN identified challenges in source water quality, drinking water safety, water distribution and wastewater treatment systems, and expressed a general concern about the health of Nut Lake and the reserve's overall environmental

health. The Elders relayed many stories of how the water on the reserve had changed from when they were children and lacked the spiritual quality that it had for the community. They said that in the past, the lake was a central focus of cultural and spiritual practices, while today, no one goes to the lake because they feel it's 'spirit' is suffering and it has been contaminated.

"I thought maybe this could work, but I wasn't ready to go all out. The Chief needed some time too. I waited for him to tell me what to do before I called them back."

- Neapetung, YQFN Councillor



After several of these Elders passed away without an opportunity to share their stories more widely through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and other processes, the Chief and Council members decided that it was important to share the stories from the CIHR-funded interviews in a respectful way. They asked the researchers about ways to share the stories that would be effective and credible for a variety of audiences. The researchers then showed the Chief and Council a whiteboard animation video they had created for another project with members of the Slave River Delta Partnership. The YQFN leadership liked this video, but wanted their video to reflect Saulteaux traditions, and also wanted assurances about open participation for the creation and ownership of the video. They wanted the work to be done *Kwayak kī-anda wendamōk ci-anokātamowin* (in a good way).

Source: Social science research laboratory, University of Saskatchewan

The researchers met with the Chief and Council four times to discuss the First Nations principles of OCAP® (ownership, control, access and possession), participation, translation, youth involvement, opportunities for capacity building and funding for the project, which was provided by the Water, Economics, Policy and Governance Network (WEPGN) at Brock University. A subcommittee was subsequently created that included a community-based research coordinator, band councilor and two researchers to analyze the content of the interviews and manage the video production. The subcommittee read the interviews out loud together and agreed on common themes.

As an additional learning opportunity, researchers suggested that two key members of the research team undertake auto-ethnography on their learning to inform future collaborations. Three questions were selected by the subcommittee to ask these members during and after the video creation process:

1. What have you gained from this project?
2. What has the community gained from this experience?
3. What do you want others to know about your experiences with this project?

WHAT DID WE FIND?

INTERVIEW THEMES

Three main themes emerged that reflected the experiences of water by women, men on the land and community leaders over their lifetimes.

The first theme — *spiritual* — expressed the importance of water as a sacred, spiritual essence that contributed to community wellbeing, which women had a responsibility to protect. The women also noted that water provides resources for the community which they are tasked with gathering, including duck eggs, berries and medicines, and a location for family or community gatherings. They acknowledged that water provides directives; flooding means that the community should undertake cleansing, while drought means that the community should fast to return balance to the cosmological system. Women discussed how new regulations, policies and developments have impeded the community's ability to maintain their sacred connections to water. They told stories of difficulties in continuing sacred practices around childbirth, death and grieving, as well as relationship-building with other nations. Much reflection was provided on how changes to the water and lake in the community were both a precursor to changes in behaviour, as well as a prophecy from Elders of long ago.

The second theme — *survival* — was expressed by Elders who were working men. They described the need that all species have for water and focused on the practicalities of water. Without water, there would be no life, no ceremonies, no plants for food or medicine, no hunting and fishing, no transportation, no way to bathe, and a general inability to survive as a community. These Elders agreed that waters provide directives. There were stories of splitting the community to ensure good stewardship of the waters when the tribe was too large to be supported by the fish, wildlife and timber in the region. The responses also focused on how stewardship and practicality principles were overpowered by the settler need for convenience. Structures such as dams and reservoirs impacted the species that were dependent on natural flows and protected non-Indigenous interests in the region. As a concept, utility superseded morality and was aptly described in discussion of how damage to surrounding non-Indigenous communities was measured in monetary values, with no dimensions given for damage to Indigenous communities. The stories told by these Elders also included dramatic moments of escape from changing waters during flooding or thaw, as well as how changing access and use of water influenced local economies, livelihoods and food provision.

The third theme — *stand-offs* — explored how political challenges have influenced the communities' identity and cultural sustainability. Stories about political changes were told by Elders with previous experience as Councilors or Chiefs. They also told stories about other Councilors and Chiefs in the community to provide lessons to youth about water governance. Many of these stories expressed community members' lack of opportunity and voice in political processes when selling goods through the "Indian agent," accessing permits to leave the reserve, influencing the decisions of water control boards, regaining land entitlements, and more recently, advocating for water rights listed in treaties. These Elders felt they were in constant stand-offs with those who held the power to make decisions.



SYMBOLS AND SEQUENCING

Once the themes were analyzed and presented to the Chief and Council, consensus was reached on narratives representing each theme, and a list of symbols was generated to guide an artist in illustrating important aspects of the story to be animated in the video. Following a series of discussions with Elders, the project subcommittee finalized the list of symbols and located them among the four human elements in the Saulteaux belief system (Table 1).

Table 1: Sample of a theme and symbols that were identified for video animation

THEME AND SUBTHEMES	SYMBOLS, LOCATION, COLOUR
THEME: SPIRIT (WOMEN'S VOICES)	These symbols will be drawn in black around the outside of the lake and mostly above the lake. Black was selected to represent humans, north, the spiritual element and winter.
Introduction	Outline of Saskatchewan, then pinpoint YQFN and outline Big Nut Lake. This will be the central focus. Pictures will be added to this shape across the video, recognizing the centrality of the lake to our spirituality and the land.
Life events (residential school, wedding)	A residential school (Muskowekwan represented as a towering brick building), farm outline, plus two wedding rings — located in the northeast.
Cabins	Log cabin around the east side of the lake, where our houses are now.
Water purity	A gleaming water droplet, joyous YQFN person's face. It means life.
Born from water; it gives us life	Outline of mother and infant in moment of love.
Lake as an afterthought	Someone throwing something over their shoulder into the lake.
Not respecting other living things	Sign saying "Beaver control, \$ per tail."
Worrying	Worried face or question marks.
Fear of losing our teachings on the sacredness of water	An Elder teaching youth.

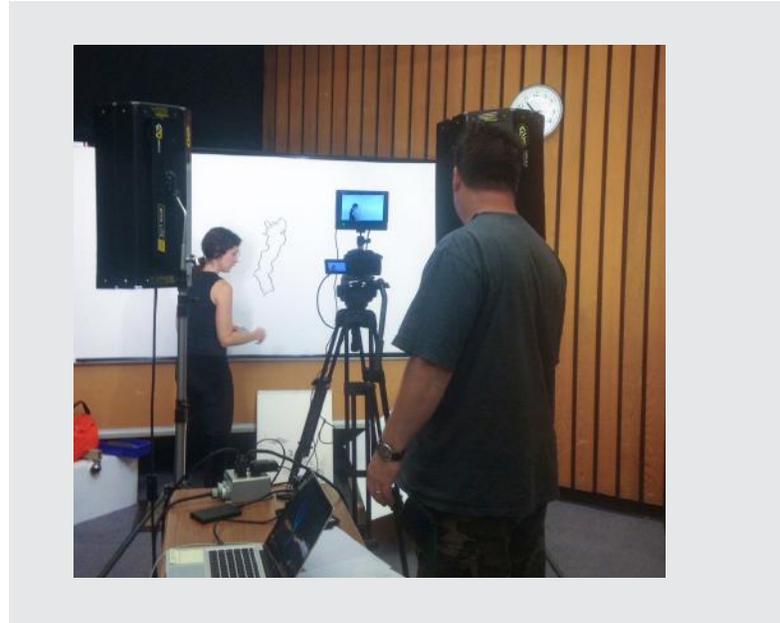


Left: Cheryl and George with drawing
 Photo: Lori Bradford

VIDEO CO-PRODUCTION

Each symbol was mapped out by Elders with the artist on a storyboard. Instead of a dry-erase marker, the artist used willow charcoal, a traditional artistic material, to draw the symbols. The drawing process was recorded and edited to make it look like the pictures were being drawn in time with the narrative. Youth volunteers were recruited to provide the voice acting and flute music was suggested by the Councilor involved in the project as being most relevant and appropriate for this narrative. During the co-production process, each section was presented to the Elders, the Chief and Council as it was finished. This iterative process of co-producing the video took 16 months to complete.

[VIEW THE VIDEO](#)



AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY AND LESSONS LEARNED

Initially, the researchers were focused on respect and relationality at the outset of the project, while the Councilor was interested in preserving an exit strategy. However, over the course of the project, the actual video became less important than the emerging relationship. By the end of the analysis, we realized that the humanity of the researchers and Councilor was precarious at first, but solidified over time through mutual challenges that they faced together.

“I’d like others to know that this kind of work is not easy... won’t produce journal articles... but to me, the gratitude of the community is worth more than those things. This work takes time and energy. It takes emotional commitment. But I like to be surrounded by a group of people working together for something bigger. In this case, it was doing justice to the lived experiences of the Elders, and also retelling a story that I think all Canadians should hear.”

– Bradford, October 2017

“We needed to let others in, so we can all learn and heal... us too. We did some reflecting on how we do things and saw that... we could open up more. We brought a lot of pride back to our community with this video. People were proud of their family members for telling their truths about water, and when the video was done we felt like finally, they [researchers] listened.”

– Neapetung, October 2017

The animated video project enhanced community-based participatory processes by providing an opportunity for community members to direct the video’s design and production, from interview analyses to widespread sharing. We co-developed key messages, collaborated in the narrative creation, chose symbols and the artist’s medium to convey the story, and involved youth in the narration. Ultimately, the community directed when the video was complete, and where it would be broadcast. The project moved the interview data from transcripts into a harmonized knowledge sharing legacy product that community members own that is aligned with their storytelling traditions in an e-compatible form. Beyond the video, the most important finding of this work was that building respectful relationships overcame individual and culturally-based challenges to trusting each other, and provided a foundation to begin healing journeys.

WHAT DO DECISION-MAKERS NEED TO KNOW?

Castleden et al's 2017 chapter on reconciliation and relationality in water research provides recommendations for collaborative, integrative, community-based and participatory research with Indigenous groups about water. We suggest the addition of four recommendations geared toward knowledge-sharing to guide community members and researchers:

1. Co-learners should have open conversations about their desired knowledge sharing products and processes early in new research programs.
2. Co-learners can overcome the negative aspects of internet-based knowledge sharing via opportunities to upload and share evidence-based research more widely using videos and alternative knowledge mobilization tools.
3. Co-learners can create processes to discuss potential anxieties about research projects. For example, there are ways that Indigenous partners can alert researchers to breaches in protocol, and researchers can alert Indigenous partners to institutional constraints.
4. Indigenous partners can work with academics to invite more collaboration, catalogue and share knowledge sharing outputs, and create a forum to discuss successful and failed processes.

The auto-ethnographical part of this work shared first-hand experiences of Indigenous partner and researcher reflections as lessons for others embarking on knowledge co-production. By doing so, we share in the Saulteaux tradition of treating each person with *ci manācihiting* (respect) and honouring our Elders, fellow students and the strangers that visit our community. Through sharing this work and the lessons learned, we honour the partnerships that will come after ours.

The Water Economics, Policy and Governance Network's (WEPGN) overarching goal is to build knowledge and facilitate exchange between social science researchers and partners, thereby increasing the application of research to decision making and enhancing water's sustainable contribution to Canada's economy and society while protecting ecosystems. WEPGN was established with a SSHRC Partnership Grant. WEPGN's objectives are to:

- Create a vibrant and multidisciplinary network of Partnerships amongst researchers, government agencies and community groups;
- Provide Insight by mobilizing knowledge from social science perspectives to improve our understanding of water's role in Canadian society and economy;
- Strengthen Connections by facilitating a multidirectional flow of knowledge amongst researchers and partners to promote more efficient and sustainable water management;
- Provide high quality Training experiences for students and practitioners with interests in water policy decision-making and management.

This project contributes to each of the above objectives, and is a notable example of a project that provides high quality training experiences for students and practitioners with interests in water policy decision-making and management.



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