How we collaborate with First Nation communities at the world's freshwater laboratory

by **Dilber Yunus**

In 2014, a brand-new chapter began at the Experimental Lakes Area (ELA) when the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) saved it from imminent closure. Now operating as a nonprofit, we here at IISD-ELA have seized the opportunity to work closely with our neighboring Indigenous Nations, recognizing that we have been operating on the traditional land of Treaty 3 since we opened in 1968.

Initial meetings between IISD-ELA senior staff and the chiefs and councils of several communities took place in the summer of 2014. Following these meetings, common areas of interest emerged; in particular, environmental monitoring and support for youth engagement and education. These discussions helped conceptualize some of the collaborative projects that were later developed, and we committed to hosting an annual Fall Feast at our research site.

Since 2015, IISD-ELA has hosted five Fall Feasts. With a different theme each year, these feasts have brought Elders, knowledge holders, youth, and helpers together with our staff to honor the abundance that the season has brought, and most importantly, to open up discussions and continue conversations.

In 2018, the Grand Council of Treaty 3 launched a community-based monitoring (CBM) training program with a goal to establish monitoring baseline data for the lakes in the area. As a result of the discussion at one of the Fall Feasts, IISD-ELA's role to provide technical support in the CBM program was conceptualized. IISD-ELA has since welcomed participants, mainly youth, from three communities to the facility to learn about CBM. With an emphasis on lake health, the program provides first-hand experience in monitoring water quality and characteristics as well as sampling fish tissue for mercury. But what's more exciting about the program is that it creates a pathway for knowledge exchange and sharing among the community members and our researchers.

Over the years and through sharing circles at Fall Feasts, the importance of language and culture in connecting youth to the land and, in turn, to field-based research like we do at IISD-ELA has become evident.

In early 2018, we initiated a collaboration with a group of Elders and language experts from the Treaty 3 community to translate IISD-ELA's series of infographic videos on various research topics into Ojibwe. We wanted to make research findings more accessible to the communities in their language. We soon realized that this project has done more than just broaden our audience. It has produced Ojibwe transcripts for two research videos supplemented by lesson plans for language learners, created vocabulary, and helped facilitate a deeper connection with Elders and partners.



Team photo taken after a full-day translation session. Pictured are Dilber Yunus (IISD-ELA), Grandmother Nancy Jones, Elder Don Jones, IISD-ELA Deputy Director Pauline Gerrard, and language teacher Jason Jones. Photo courtesy of IISD Experimental Lakes Area.

In addition to the collaborations highlighted above, there are other ongoing projects and future initiatives, including a land-water-based traditional and scientific knowledge camp for youth (currently postponed due to COVID-19), a resources bundle to support and supplement the CBM training program, and a potential project looking into what Indigenous-led research would look like and how the two ways of knowing can work together in understanding emerging environmental issues.

The work engaging Indigenous communities in Treaty 3 is a journey of learning, sharing, and reconciliation. We have learned that building long-term and in-depth relationships based on trust and respect with both communities and individuals is the first step toward many meaningful collaborations and partnerships; knowledge sharing is a two-way exchange of information; listening and continuous learning are key; and that we must always keep in mind the importance of language and culture.

Looking ahead, here at the world's freshwater laboratory we will continue to nurture established connections with communities and individuals, learn from knowledge holders, and create opportunities for knowledge exchange; continue to support CBM and youth engagement in language, culture, and land-based research; and explore ways to bring two ways of knowing and to create space for Indigenous wisdom and participation.

Dilber Yunus *is the outreach officer at the IISD Experimental Lakes Area.*

"Sharing our teachings of the water with our friends at ELA was paramount to what is needed for the longevity of all types of water. Together we learned about what is going into our water systems, and how we can work with our leaders of tomorrow to help us keep the next Seven Generations safe. Our water beings will greatly benefit from this important collaboration. Together, we are stronger!"

From Grandmother Nancy Jones, Elder Don Jones, and Ojibwe Language Teacher Jason Jones from Ninigoonsiminikaaning First Nation