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# Canada wants more Indigenous knowledge in IPCC climate reports

Chloe Williams · April 11, 2023



Edézhíe guardians undertake wildlife camera training, together with guardians from the Ts'udé Niliné Tuyeta protected area. Photo: Ashley Menicoche

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Canadian delegates to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change have called for broader inclusion of Indigenous knowledge in future climate reports.

The comments were made at an IPCC meeting in Switzerland, where 195 nations' delegates negotiated the wording **of a report** that summarizes years of climate change research for policymakers.

In closing remarks at the March meeting, Canadian delegates highlighted the importance of Indigenous peoples and stressed the need to incorporate Indigenous knowledge from the start of the next reporting process, according to the [Earth Negotiations Bulletin](#), a non-profit that reported on the deliberations.

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[Elizabeth Bush](#), a science advisor for Environment and Climate Change Canada's climate research division and member of the Canadian delegation, told Cabin Radio: "We take our responsibility seriously to show leadership on this issue."

The IPCC reports on climate change in years-long periods known as assessment cycles.

The latest one – the [sixth assessment cycle](#), known as AR6 – started in 2015 and recently concluded. The IPCC now begins its seventh assessment cycle, known as AR7.

**Lisa Qiluqqi Koperqualuk**, president of the Inuit Circumpolar Council of Canada, said Canadian delegates acknowledging the importance of Indigenous knowledge shows respect.

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She said the Inuit Circumpolar Council, which sent delegates to the March meeting, had suggested the comment be made.

The Earth Negotiations Bulletin reported that the meeting’s deliberations took so long – days of non-stop talks – that many delegates had to leave before it concluded.

“In those last hours, our delegates were no longer there,” Koperqualuk said. “But we still wanted to leave some last words so as to ensure that Indigenous knowledge has that space.”

“We really appreciate that support,” she said.

## A slow awakening

According to the **Inuit Circumpolar Council**, Indigenous knowledge is “a systematic way of thinking applied to phenomena across biological, physical, cultural, and spiritual systems. It includes insights based on evidence and acquired through direct and long-term experiences and extensive and multigenerational observation, lessons, and skills.”

While Indigenous knowledge has developed over millennia, the Inuit Circumpolar Council states, it is still developing through knowledge acquired today and in the future.

In recent years, there has been growing recognition that Indigenous peoples are disproportionately affected by climate change and their knowledge is critical to understanding the challenges and finding solutions.

**Dahti Tsetso**, deputy director of the Indigenous Leadership Initiative, said that knowledge has yet to be properly utilized when it comes to climate change.

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“It’s taken people a while to even really recognize and look to Indigenous people in our communities as being of value, and having knowledge that’s of value,” Tsetso said.

Dahti Tsetso speaks with then-Prince Charles about her work during a royal visit in 2022. Emily Blake/Cabin Radio

The IPCC is no exception. Its climate reports have long under-represented Indigenous issues and Indigenous knowledge, **researchers wrote** in 2016 in the journal Nature Climate Change.

Analyzing a portion of the IPCC's fifth assessment report, the authors concluded that Indigenous peoples are often referenced in a general way and there is "limited critical engagement with the diversity, range and complexities of indigenous knowledge systems."

The problem stems from how the IPCC produces its reports.

**Elisabeth Gilmore** is a senior climate policy advisor for Environment and Climate Change Canada and associate professor at Carleton University who has been an IPCC author as well as a Canadian delegate.

The IPCC is an assessment body, Gilmore said, which means the panel does not conduct its own research. Instead, IPCC authors compile and assess literature, primarily peer-reviewed studies and reports.

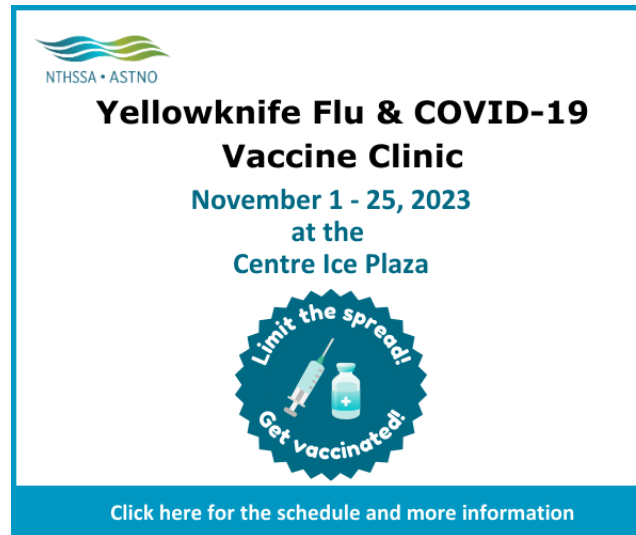
Gilmore said that approach ensures authors are examining solid science but also excludes a lot of information.

She said progress is being made. One of the big innovations of AR6, according to Gilmore, is that some steps were taken to incorporate information from beyond scholarly journals.

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According to **Miguel Sioui**, an associate professor in Wilfrid Laurier University's Department of Geography and Environmental Studies and a member of the Huron-Wendat First Nation, the growing role of Indigenous knowledge in AR6 was observable.

"There are more Indigenous scholars and authors that participated in the writing," he said.

Sioui pointed to "heavy hitters" like **Deborah McGregor**, a leading Indigenous stewardship scholar, and **Kyle Whyte**, an Indigenous environmental philosopher. Sioui also contributed a box about Indigenous "responsibility-based thinking" in the North American chapter of one report.

Sioui expects a larger Indigenous presence in the next assessment cycle.

Bush and Gilmore similarly underlined the need to incorporate Indigenous knowledge from the start of AR7.

"What we don't want to do is be coming in late in the game," Bush said, adding that improving the way in which Indigenous knowledge is accessed and included must be an early action.

## Challenges ahead

Although barriers are diminishing, Sioui said there is still resistance to meaningfully engaging Indigenous knowledge and perspectives at national and international levels.

Bush, too, said some IPCC reports do a better job of reflecting that knowledge than

others. She said a recent report on impacts, adaptation and vulnerability used Indigenous knowledge more extensively than a similar report on the science of climate change.

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“There’s clearly work to be done,” she said, “in terms of accessing Indigenous knowledge on observations of changes in the climate, for which we know there are ample Indigenous observations.”

Members of the Dehcho K'éhodi Guardians program with the Dehcho First Nations. Photo: Amos Scott

Bush said Canada has an important role in better including Indigenous knowledge because the IPCC will look to nations with experience on the topic.

“If we develop guidance on how to better include Indigenous knowledge in our national assessments, that would be something that we could offer,” she said.

As part of Canada’s national assessment cycle, a team of authors has developed advice on how to draw on Indigenous knowledge. Bush said she and her colleagues have also begun conversations with national Indigenous organizations about how to incorporate Indigenous knowledge into an upcoming report more effectively.

Koperqualuk, meanwhile, said there are “still those who believe that there’s no space for Indigenous knowledge and that it’s inferior to Western knowledge.”

Although Canada’s closing remarks at the IPCC meeting were supported by delegates from Australia, Koperqualuk said not all IPCC member states are so ready to be supportive of Indigenous peoples. She said a hurdle will be gaining support from

additional member states.

Governments will also need to put their money where their mouth is, according to Tsetso.

“If we’re going to say that we value Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous knowledge systems, we have to resource them,” she said.

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Tsetso said one of the biggest challenges in communities stepping up to leadership roles is steady funding, adding that staff often spend a lot of time just trying to keep their programs going.

Tsetso thinks there is value in weaving together Indigenous and Western knowledge,

but she looks forward to the day when Indigenous knowledge can take the lead.

“In trying to fit Indigenous knowledge into Western science systems, we’re completely missing the mark,” she said.

“We need to invert the knowledge framework in order to really capitalize on the best of both knowledge systems.”

She added that it can be humbling to have the opportunity to sit with Indigenous knowledge holders.

“They have a whole system, a whole library in their minds, and are able to interpret changes in the landscape around us.”

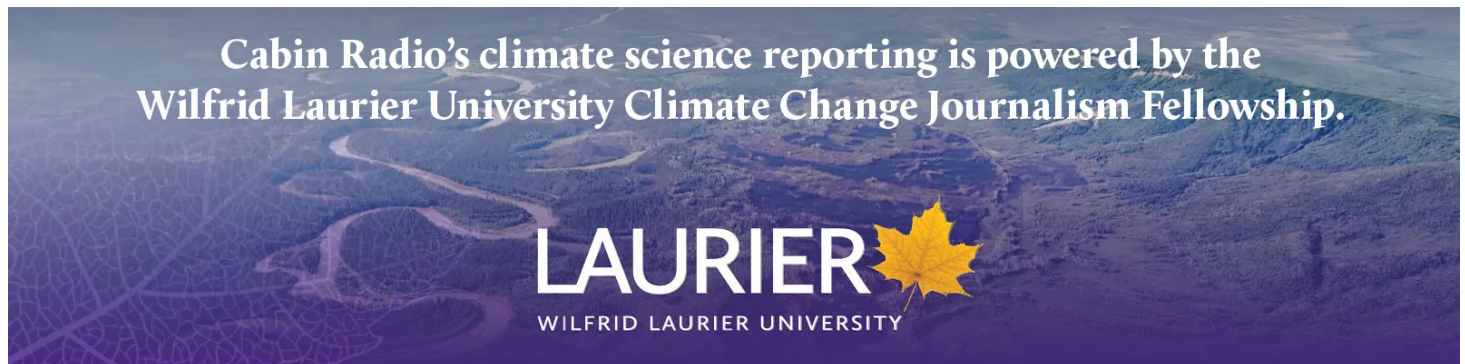
Ideally, Tsetso said, we would tap into that vast knowledge system, have it be the leading framework and complement it with expertise within Western science.

“What an empowered model that would be,” she said.

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This article written by:

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