



## CASE STUDY: **ADJUSTING TO RESPECT DIFFERENT WAYS OF KNOWING**

Having a flexible mindset helps a team ensure respectful integration of different forms of knowledge. After an intentional pause, team members let go of their assumptions and adjust their approach to go deeper with their collaborators.

**“We are never done knowing.”**

**Karina Heim**, *Coastal Training Program Coordinator,  
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### OVERVIEW

The project team’s experience adjusting their expectations, being receptive to feedback, and pausing to get the additional input they required provide a valuable example of how to navigate projects that span differing knowledge systems. Ultimately, the resulting plant selection guide will inform landowners, shoreline managers, and educators as they work to stabilize shorelines; elevate Ojibwe knowledge and lifeways; and, most importantly, elevate the experience of adjusting an approach to respect different knowledge systems and those who carry that knowledge.

### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Shoreline stabilization along Lake Superior (Gichi-gami) is becoming increasingly important as frequent flood events and fluctuating water levels accelerate shoreline erosion. Further demand for nature-based solutions, combined with the declining presence of native and culturally significant plants, presents opportunities both to address shoreline management issues as well as to preserve knowledge of and access to important plants in Anishinaabe (specifically Ojibwe) territories.

To help elevate the cultural significance of plants and preserve their knowledge, Indigenous knowledge holders agreed to advise a project team as they developed a planting guide for the Gichi-gami basin. As discussions began, the team

Opwaaganaatig/Baakwaanaatig/Baakwaanamizh/Staghorn Sumac (*Rhus typhina*). *Photo by Marisa Lee.*

quickly discovered differing expectations about what and how Indigenous knowledge would inform the final guide.

To ensure a respectful integration of different knowledge systems within the guide, the team decided to pause, reevaluate their assumptions about what the final product would be, and adapt their approach to better welcome their collaborators by adding intentional opportunities to discuss cultural narratives and how to include them in the work.



## PROJECT TEAM'S APPROACH

The project team's initial approach was generally cautious about overstating what cultural knowledge would be presented in the guide but hoped to include Ojibwe language (Anishinaabemowin) and culturally significant plant stories and uses. Soon after the project began, Indigenous knowledge holders within the project team suggested the group further refine this approach through a more intentional emphasis on how to incorporate cultural knowledge.

At their suggestion, the team paused the development of the planting guide in order to seek further guidance in the form of a cultural advisory committee for the project. The goals of this outreach included notifying Tribes of the project, seeking guidance on how it could benefit their communities, and asking for suggestions for advisory committee participants.

The project team sent formal requests to each of the three Ojibwe Bands within the project geography in search of recommendations on who to invite to the cultural advisory committee. Outreach progressed differently for each band and relied on a combination of formal and informal connections. One band's Tribal Council personally met with the team to recommend staff. Another band redirected the request to the Tribe's Natural Resources Department staff, who assisted the team. The third band did not respond, so the team informally approached personal contacts from previous projects with the Tribe.

Continued online conversations with recommended contacts led to the formation of the advisory committee, who counseled the team on what information was appropriate to share in the guide and what was not. As part of this outreach, the project team followed Ojibwe custom and gifted tobacco (asemaa) to the individuals invited to serve on the advisory committee during their first in-person meeting (see: "Strengthen relationships through culturally important activities and gifts" below).

In three meetings throughout the first year of the project, the advisory committee provided guidance on a range of matters, including framing the storytelling approach, potential uses for the planting guide that benefit the community, the appropriate level of information to share, and ways to meaningfully and respectfully visualize complex information. For example, the advisory

*Mini/Velvet-leaf Blueberry (Vaccinium myrtilloides). Photo by Marisa Lee.*

committee encouraged the project team to give deliberately generalized descriptions of some information, both to honor the complexity of Ojibwe-flora relationships and to limit misuse of plants. It was this wisdom that helped the team shift away from sharing sensitive plant information in the guide. They acknowledged that a single piece of literature would be insufficient to fully explain Ojibwe relationships with plants—particularly the important recognition of plants as beings with spirit and agency. Some committee members also voiced concerns that those who lacked the proper practice and background knowledge to use some of the detailed information responsibly and respectfully could accidentally harm themselves or others.

While these conversations took place, the project team created and shared a table of recommended species that includes ecological plant information, such as environmental tolerances and soil-stabilizing traits. At the advisory committee's recommendation, the guide categorizes cultural relationships to plants—including medicinal, culinary, technological, and ceremonial uses—rather than comprehensively detailing the Indigenous uses of each plant, and represents these relationships using iconography. The table also identifies different habitats in estuarine and open coast habitats, and elaborates on planting and placement recommendations, as well as browsing/harvesting information. This approach accommodated the advisory committee's preference that the guide remain "intentionally vague" about cultural plant uses in a written document, and ensures that newcomers must reach out to Indigenous knowledge holders if they want to earn the right to receive deeper knowledge in a culturally respectful manner.

## ADVICE AND INSIGHTS

While each project and set of partners is unique, a number of insights and advice can be gleaned from this project that are likely relevant to other projects. Details from this project are included to help illustrate the insights and advice, and underscore the significance of context when considering their application.

## BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

**Build and maintain personal bonds with knowledge holders.** Ideally, form these connections prior to starting a project since it is difficult to gain trust and promote real reciprocity within a limited time window. To ensure relationships are built in a good way and are non-extractive, do not rush relationship-building. By continuing to show up and have conversations, relationships develop and become less transactional, leading to new opportunities. In this project, having multiple conversations and reaching consensus over the iconography framework increased trust and enabled more participation that likely would not have happened otherwise.



**Be willing to keep the relationship informal.** In this project, the team did not attempt to make any formal agreements since they felt it was important to respect people's individuality and ensure participation was voluntary. To support this objective, the project team kept advisory meetings conversational and opted not to impose agendas on the advisory committee. This empowered the advisory committee to focus on what **they** thought was important in their conversations.

**Strengthen relationships through culturally important activities and gifts.** Even if you are unfamiliar with a specific cultural or gifting practice, approach knowledge-holders with humility, authenticity, and the appropriate assembly of gifts to show them that you recognize the importance of the practice and that you want to learn about the context in which you are working. When considering appropriate activities and/or gifts, remember that Tribes are **not** all the same; nor are members of Tribal communities. To find appropriate approaches, look into local information resources—such as an individual Tribe's website—and seek advice from Elders, Tribal staff, and others within the community.

Be direct in your request for help. For this project, the passing of tobacco demonstrated a recognizable declaration of intent in which the project team asked knowledge holders in Tribal communities for their help with the understanding that knowledge holders are not obligated to share their knowledge.

**Compensate knowledge holders for their time and expertise.** Financial compensation for knowledge holders is an important budget line to consider when developing any project proposal. Teams should be prepared to compensate knowledge holders for the time they give to share the knowledge; the essence of knowledge is given freely. This applies whether the knowledge holders are participating as team members or attending a single meeting in an advisory role. In addition, the project team should learn about the other responsibilities and timelines that the knowledge holders have and consider how the project timelines or responsibilities can accommodate them. In this project, the team included stipends for knowledge holders and workshop participation as budget items from the outset.

## FIND THE RIGHT MINDSET

### **Be willing to adjust your expectations about the process and final products, or in response to intended user feedback.**

The project embraced this mindset when they recognized that asking the advisory committee for specific uses of plants was not appropriate. They adjusted their inquiry towards general uses of specific plants.

### **Approach conversations with Indigenous knowledge holders with a passion to learn, and with a willingness to be still and listen.**

Much Indigenous knowledge sits outside the current understanding of institutional knowledge. It may be difficult to absorb and understand quickly. With humility, allow room for your understanding of other perspectives to grow.



The team's approach to advisory council meetings included opportunities for sharing and cross-cultural learning that otherwise may not have happened. For example, the team learned about Ojibwe philosophies on personhood, which include the recognition of plants as beings with spirits of higher standing than humans. Note: *Specific details of the Ojibwe creation story typically are not shared outside of Tribal communities. The basic framework, which elaborates on the orders of creation, can be found in a variety of publications.*

**Avoid romanticizing Indigenous knowledge and culture.** Collaborators may intentionally or unintentionally romanticize traditional perspectives in ways that can also reinforce racial stereotypes, e.g., the idea that Indigenous peoples inherently live in harmony with nature. During initial discussions, some members of the advisory committee emphasized that they were more concerned with collaborators fetishizing and appropriating their knowledge than with the lack of intellectual property protections for traditional knowledge, which is also a key concern. Although not all Tribal partners would agree that it is the most important, fetishization remains a major issue that should be avoided. The advisory council urged collaborators to honor their own cultures and knowledge systems so as not to fetishize or appropriate Indigenous culture and knowledge.

**Allow some flexibility in final products for updates.** Accept that new information may expand your understanding in previously unthinkable ways or may even challenge “settled” understandings. The project team recognized that they were unable to communicate with all knowledge holders within the scope of this project, that new stories could emerge in the future, and that some knowledge holders not reached through this project likely had useful information that others did not possess. The project team plans to include new, distinct information within the guide and—with the help of the advisory committee—flag any information that is not considered “certain” for further investigation rather than exclude it.

*Opwaaganaatig/Baakwaanaatig/Baakwaanamizh/Staghorn Sumac (Rhus typhina). Photo by Marisa Lee.*

## SHARE KNOWLEDGE AND DATA

**Understand and follow the norms of knowledge sharing.** One often has to earn the right to learn sensitive information, much of which is sacred and not meant to be shared except under specific circumstances. For this project, the team's discussions with the advisory committee helped clarify what kind of knowledge was appropriate to share in the planting guide and the level of detail that should be provided.

**Allow flexibility in how you collect and manage data.** Indigenous knowledge often interweaves cultural values and perspectives with ecological knowledge. It takes care, time, thought, and caution to convey Indigenous ways of knowing in appropriate ways that avoid misrepresentation and extractive or exploitative practices. In general, the practices of institutional science—such as database development or peer-reviewed publication—may not be well-suited or appropriate for cultural knowledge capture.

The project team's selective and intentional avoidance of detailed cultural knowledge is one way to avoid accidentally sharing knowledge that is not appropriate to share. When in doubt, have a truthful and respectful conversation with knowledge holders before you try to collect any privileged information. NOAA provides specific guidance about use and communication of Traditional Ecological Knowledge, which can be found in the [Science Collaborative's Data Sharing Guidance](#) and on [NOAA's Tribal Resources and Updates](#) page.

**Modify data- and knowledge-sharing agreements to suit the needs of the knowledge holder.** In many cases, Tribal Institutional Review Board (IRB) processes may be required *in addition* to university IRB processes. In response to a history of exploitation, many Indigenous communities are cautious about the release of sensitive information. Historically, data- and knowledge-sharing agreements have imposed additional restrictions or had unforeseen consequences in terms of how and when researchers shared Indigenous knowledge, often going beyond the terms to which the community or knowledge holder initially agreed.

Make sure to have open dialogue about knowledge and data sovereignty early in project planning. For this project, the team prevented the unintended release of sensitive information and associated detriment to the community by talking with knowledge holders, listening to their concerns, and ensuring that partners were aware of and freely consented to the inclusion of specific information.

## Special thanks to contributing authors:

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## Suggested citation:

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Salgado, V., Heim, K., Croll, R., Panci, H., Smith, K. (2023, March). Case Study: Adjusting to Respect Different Ways of Knowing. National Estuarine Research Reserve System (NERRS) Science Collaborative. Retrieved from <https://nerrsciencecollaborative.org/guide/design/process>.

To learn more about this project, visit the Project Page: <https://nerrsciencecollaborative.org/project/Heim21>

To access other case studies and resources for conducting collaborative science projects, visit: [A Guide to Collaborative Science](#).

Ojibwemowin terms do not translate effectively to English or share the same meaning as the common or scientific names. We can only partially view these plant beings through an Ojibwe lens without the stories and meanings that underlie them. Name-sharing is something that has been discussed a great deal in this project. The names shared in this document are those known to the project team and may not represent all known names and relationships with these plants



**National Estuarine  
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