

Study: Land-based Practice for Indigenous Health and Wellness in the Northwest Territories, Yukon, and Nunavut



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Summary of Results

This study describes some of the many health benefits and positive outcomes that can come from spending more time out on the land, especially in supporting youth resilience and wellness in response to high rates of suicide in Canada's north. This research found that Land-based practice is a highly effective way of supporting Indigenous youth and adults' reconnection with the Land, their identity and culture in a rapidly changing world.

The term *Land-based* is being used across the north to describe an Indigenous understanding of the world, and the inseparability of land and water from our health and wellbeing. It is a key concept for understanding First Nations, Métis and Inuit views on mental wellness, which can't be separated from emotional, physical and spiritual health or the land itself. Land-based understandings recognize that *being on the land itself heals*. This traditional knowledge (TK) is further supported by current biomedical research documenting in detail the many health and healing benefits of spending time in the outdoors including improved cognition, memory and mood.

This study recommends that any health intervention developed within northern Canada should consider this land-based relationship in its design. This is an important move towards reconciliation in northern Canada, based on a recent history of forced relocation from life on the land and its related health challenges. Providing opportunities for First Nations, Métis and Inuit youth and adults to access the land in a meaningful way, can help support Indigenous and western education, mental health and wellbeing, and environmental outcomes in our shared communities.

Health Benefits: Land-based environmental, educational, healing or recreational programs all contribute to mental wellness and other healthy outcomes through promoting various protective factors of individual and community resilience.

For example, Land-based activities have been shown to contribute to:

- Increased cultural understanding (*cultural identity, language*)
- Positive social relationships (*‘people just get along better’*)
- Increased short and long term wellbeing (*mood, happiness, less stress*)
- Physical health (*active living, country food, substance-free environment*)
- Increased self-confidence (*clarified role in community, empowerment*)
- Positive changes in behavior (*less conflict, more sharing*).

Other benefits include:

- Land-stewardship/care for the land supporting environmental outcomes and land rights (*parks, sustainable management, outdoor tourism*)
- Transmission of traditional knowledge (TK) or *Inuit qaujimajatuqangit (IQ)*
- Enhanced learning, especially for students who struggle in western-based school settings
- Culturally safe healing setting for youth at risk, inmates, and those healing from addictions, trauma
- Community development and capacity building through increasing land-skills, food-sustainability through harvesting, various certifications (*firearm safety etc.*)
- Intergenerational language transfer, (*‘language is from the land’*)
- Effective setting for training non-Indigenous workers in increased cultural understanding

Methods: An Indigenous storytelling methodology framed the research.

In this study, 11 Indigenous land-based experts were interviewed from across the Northwest Territories, Nunavut and the Yukon, and a detailed review of literature was completed looking at outcomes of different land-based programs. Though cultural practices were very different between Inuit, First Nations and Métis communities, the idea was to look at similarities across the three territorial regions.

Terminology: This study aimed to help define land-based terminology across the Northwest Territories, Yukon and Nunavut for policy makers¹.

¹ *First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities will have their own meaningful land terminology in their own languages that should be respected and followed.*

Land-based practice, in this study, included both informal activities and formally organized land-based programs.

Land-based describes an Indigenous way of life rooted in Traditional Knowledge, where everything is connected and related to the land and water.

Land-based activities include going out berry or egg picking, hunting with family, trapping, fishing, picking traditional medicines, tanning hides etc.

Land-based programs describe organized activities on the land. Formal Land-based programs can be organized through schools, justice, health, or other organizations and were noted as a relatively new phenomenon based in a present day reality and governance. They were seen as being especially beneficial for people who do not have the resources or the connections to access traditional land through friends or family, and most notably youth.

Land-based healing describes a set of culturally-defined healing practices in a non-urban location, in which the land is a host and partner to the healing process. There is a focus on renewing a person's relationship and connection with the land in order to restore balance and identity. Western therapeutic approaches may be integrated into Land-based healing programs.

Land-based education is the traditional form of Indigenous education. It is based on learning from the land through observation, relationship, and experience. Land skills, language and cultural protocols are key components.

Promising practices of current programs:

- Flexibility during programming (*flexible structure, experiential learning*)
- Community driven and directed (*cultural protocols followed*)
- Involving and supporting youth (*health promotion and early prevention*)
- Key Elders and healthy resource people (*unique skill sets honored*)
- Quality of the land location (*remoteness, access, significance*)
- Addressing safety (*Spiritual, mental, physical and emotional, trauma informed*)

Five challenges that were identified to implementing Land-based programs:

- Cross-cultural barriers in defining outcomes and the importance of programs (*obtaining approval, funding, and flexibility in programming*)
- Obtaining stable core funding to sustain successful programs over time
- Logistics and safety considerations and resources required (*ski-doo's, training, gas, time off work, first aid, suitable camp etc.*)

- Unique skillset required for staff and challenges for organizers (*intensity of work, working with groups of youth, weather, knowing the land, travel etc.*)
- Very recent colonial disruption of knowledge transmission (*lasting impacts of residential schools, sled-dog slaughter, 9-5 workday, school calendar, and constant demands and high cost of present day life*).

Future Research

More work and research can be done around Land-based practice to better support effective programming and to overcome its unique challenges. For example, more research is needed to elevate Land-based programs from ad-hoc or ‘special programming’ to programming that is more central within education, environmental, justice and health organizations. More research into each of the predicted individual and collective health outcomes in the northern context would be beneficial.

Land Based Program Recommendations

- Expand definitions of mental health and wellness to include the land. For example being out on the land for First Nation, Métis and Inuit in the north is mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually healing.
 - Recognize at a policy level that colonial disruption and rapid relocation of Indigenous people *from the land* has led to the negative health problems we see today (addictions, diabetes, and suicide) and thus *returning to land practices to reconnect with cultural identity can work to correct these health outcomes*.
 - Provide opportunities for ongoing core funding of initiatives.
 - Provide more flexibility for all employees and students to access the land.
 - Provide evaluation support/training for program leaders to capture the benefits and improve programming over time.
 - Reward health programming proposals which touch on a range of different benefits versus only one or two outcomes (for example a land-based program might address holistic educational, justice and health outcomes).
 - Make Indigenous youth land engagement a priority so that youth at a young age develop cultural resilience, active lifestyle, and healthy diet as prevention of further health challenges later in life.
 - Allow for flexibility in program design and outcomes in order to support culturally appropriate learning and TK transfer while on the land.
 - Support training for those who want to design, lead, run and evaluate these programs, especially young adults (*engagement, coursework, land-based skills, safety training, mentorship by Elders and others*).
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