

Summary Report from the Redberry Lake Biosphere Region and *TRANSECTS* Workshop



University of Saskatchewan, September 14th, 2022

Introduction to workshop and presentations

Members of *TRANSECTS*, the Redberry Lake Biosphere Region, Mistawasis Nêhiyawak, Muskeg Lake Cree Nation, graduate students and professors from the School of Environment and Sustainability, participated in a workshop designed to reflect on principles and promising practices for conducting transdisciplinary research and collaborating with Biosphere Regions and Reserves.



Dr. Maureen Reed welcomed all participants to the event and provided a land acknowledgement and shared with all the attendants the purpose of the gathering: to bring together people that come from different backgrounds (academic, government agencies, national and provincial government, First Nations communities, students) who collaborate with and work in the Redberry Lake Biosphere Region (RLBR) to discuss principles and promising practices in

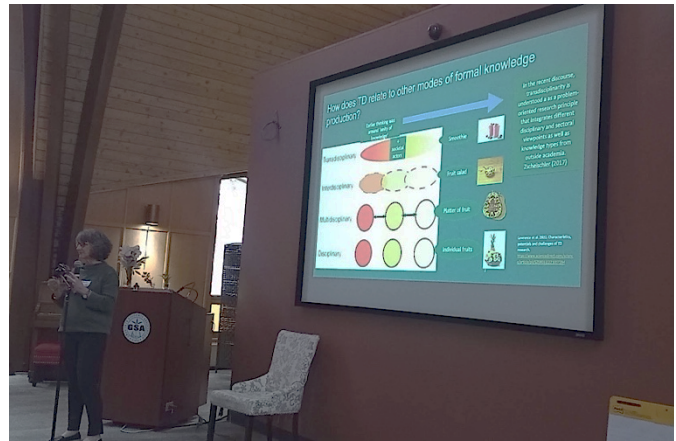
transdisciplinary research, opportunities for collaboration, and in general, to provide a space to share ideas, reflect, and connect.

The workshop started with a series of presentations. First, John Kindrachuk (Executive Direction of Redberry Lake Biosphere Region [RLBR]) explained the foundations of Biosphere Regions and focused on how the governance and management of Biosphere Regions work in the Canadian context. John addressed the importance of meaningful engagement with Indigenous People and highlighted some of the ongoing projects of the RLBR: 1) work with high school students in Indigenous communities to integrate Traditional Knowledge in the protection of species at risk that live in the BR and species of



cultural importance to Indigenous People; 2) work towards sustainable development for rural communities, with a particular interest in environmental tourism and highlighting the RLBR potential using online media. John highlighted that sustainability requires the integration of both knowledge and practice, which can be enabled by engaging Indigenous Knowledge and Traditional Ecological Knowledge to support the conservation and sustainability of land and the environment more generally. Finally, John highlighted that within the RLBR, reconciliation is key when they are planning projects in the region.

Following John's presentation, Maureen introduced the participants to *TRANSECTS* and explained how the project is built on collaborations among practitioners, academics, and students. Following this presentation, Dr. Sheona Shackleton gave participants a brief introduction to transdisciplinary research and practice, remarking on the importance of co-identifying complex problems, teamwork, collaborations, and partnerships to collectively find solutions and co-producing new knowledge. One of the main challenges for this kind of research is making the jump from identifying problems to taking action; besides this, transdisciplinary researchers also need to work to find common ground so all partners can learn together and from each other.



Following Sheona's presentation, practitioner Katherine Finn shared her insights on community engagement from her work with Indigenous communities in the Prairies region. She talked about the importance of seeking genuine understanding with people, developing interdependency, creating mutual benefits, and taking care of the relationships we build with people, by being present either virtually or in person. She also mentioned the importance of teamwork and bringing together people with different skills. Finally, she remarked on the importance of project participants developing a sense of ownership and commitment towards the projects, which can be achieved by all parties contributing and benefiting from the projects. She also described the need to be mindful of how much



people can contribute, since this will vary across partners. As such, it's important to consider people's and communities' limitations without excluding them or demanding more than they are able and willing to provide. Katherine concluded her presentation by saying that knowledge co-production is context-based, pluralistic, goal-oriented, and interactive.

Dr. Eureta Rosenberg presented principles for transdisciplinarity and good ways to do research, based on discussions by colleagues at an earlier workshop in South Africa, which



included students, field practitioners, academics, biosphere reserve and national park managers. Some of the key aspects underpinning these principles are systemic thinking, integration, combining sustainability with social justice, and developing research agendas. Some of these principles align with those already drafted by *TRANSECTS*, with a few providing deeper analysis, and other principles are new to the *TRANSECTS* team. Eureta reminded participants that most

sustainability challenges have economic, social, cultural, spiritual, and political dimensions that all need to be considered. *TRANSECTS* is about conducting international and intercultural research in an engaging way, which offers opportunities to learn and work together, and not gloss over those things we tend to overlook. Principles are thus important to guide how we work together and need to resonate with and make sense to all involved if they are to help build a coherent community of practice. Many of these principles are interwoven and interdependent and should promote engaged research that is conducted ethically, respectfully, and reciprocally. Work that requires patience, investment of time to learn the context (where one is working), being adaptable, and using language that is clear and context-appropriate.

Following the presentations, there were rounds of reflections/discussions in small breakout groups, the summary of these discussions corresponds to the next section of this report.

Workshop reflections and discussion

The discussion can be separated into three main themes: i) Good practices and associated challenges ii) Reviewing the guiding principles, and iii) Addressing training requirements.

i) Good practices and associated challenges

We began by having participants in every breakout room identifying the key practices that support engaged research with partners. The sixteen practices that were discussed, without being ranked in importance, were:

- **Include people and show initiative:** Examples include inviting people to meet and highlighting the importance of recognizing that meetings occur on traditional lands, providing adequate spaces for sharing and listening, including diverse people in appropriate ways, reaching out, being open to collaborating and being welcoming. This practice is particularly important when those with power/authority take the initiative to bring people together (for example, by creating open and public events) and include as many stakeholders as possible.

- **Employ intergenerational practices:** Examples include creating opportunities and spaces for kids/youth and promoting intergenerational dialogue, and recognizing the importance of being role models, so incoming generations learn that teamwork and partnerships are relevant and important.
- **Recognize imbalances and different resources' availability:** This practice refers to acknowledging the different capacities that different partners might have, such as the time they can give to the project, or how much they can engage. Linked to this, is addressing the power imbalances and dynamics that projects will have. We need to be mindful of local people's scope and capacity to align tasks, not create an extra burden, and keep relationships balanced.
- **Be mindful and cognizant of the context:** It is important for people conducting transdisciplinary research to value traditional practices and local protocols, to consult land users and community leaders, to be aware of the context one is in, and to make sure that participants have given their free and informed consent to work with us. Understanding what type of approach our community engagement is following (bottom-up or top-down).
- **Ethical and trustworthy practices:** Hold oneself accountable, be transparent and clear about your intentions, be honest, and show respect to all the people that work with us.
- **Commit to working towards reconciliation:** We need to reflect on historical and ongoing colonization issues, act together in addressing such issues, and be open to constructive dialogue.
- **Build resilient projects:** For this, we need to be able to keep a longitudinal analysis of the challenges and successes that projects face, this might be possible if we develop ways to monitor projects, track positive and negative outcomes, and also in making the projects independent from governmental changes.
- **Use appropriate language and communicate effectively:** It is important to communicate clearly what the partnerships represent. We can find other ways besides written documents to communicate with others. Choosing appropriate communication methods depending on the context and making sure that the language used is respectful.
- **Work at different and appropriate scales:** When possible, we should aim for our projects to reach different scales, this will allow us to understand local contexts and build relationships, but also to share our learnings, find commonalities across scales and develop effective strategies.
- **Use diverse methods:** Promote experiential learning. Use visual tools and in-land activities to communicate and encourage further and deeper discussions. Using



open-ended questions and bottom-up approaches. Use tools that allow people's voices to be represented, such as human-centered design or boundary objects. Use methods that stimulate conversation: maps, aerial photos, working with producers, transect walks, participatory methods, and visual tools. These kinds of methods can shed light on actual needs.

- **Find ways to involve local communities:** An effective practice is to engage community members on relevant local topics and to co-develop diverse areas (or all parts) of the projects such as engagement strategies.
- **Embrace diversity:** Teamwork should be possible while also respecting individual and collective identities.
- **Make the time to engage and to build and take care of relationships:** When working with communities it is useful to meet in less structured settings and plan for less formal meetings and face-to-face interactions, such as sharing meals, or walks. Take the time to interact with the landscape and with people. Balancing virtual and in-person meetings. In-person is more valuable and eases deeper connections. Important to constant checking and keep connected. Be mindful, be in the moment and retain information instead of relying too much on other information. Slow time envelop, taking time to meet the people outside of the project's events.
- **Plan funding and compensations:** Match funds availability before proposals become successful. Compensate local people for their time.
- **Identify key collaborators:** Have key collaborators and champions and create a team that can support their work. People should be passionate about their work.
- **Build interconnections:** Have clusters of people at different levels and promote activities where members of the clusters can interconnect. Networking leads to collaboration or could lead to collaboration since people are drawn to meet new people and learn from them.



After identifying key practices, participants were asked to reflect in their groups what are some challenges that might hinder their application. Eight main challenges were identified, and are briefly described in the next list. Challenges spoke to different areas of the engaged research process such as building collaboration, embracing diversity, ensuring meaningful research outcomes, and resources -of different kinds- limitations.

- **Bring diverse interests together:** It has been challenging to develop projects that bring together diverse interests, when a project of this nature is designed, another challenge arises: to make sure that the different goals are represented. It is also challenging to move away from the idea of “different goals in a single project” and instead to think that “we could all work towards a common goal”. Finding a common goal is difficult.

- **Ensure representation and access:** Representation is important, but a challenge is to find balance in the voices represented and provide voice and opportunities to those often under-represented. The challenge of levelling the playing field.
- **Spark institutional change:** A big challenge is that institutions don't point out or highlight the collaborative process of transdisciplinary research. Also, to communicate to funders that funding is needed for long-term projects, and this includes having funding for developing relationships with people, besides this, finding sources of funding is also challenging.
- **Have the resources to build relationships:** Our work is often tied to funding requirements, which often fails to contemplate the time it takes to build relationships; leading us to do things in a rush, with limited community engagement. We don't allow ourselves to be flexible enough with our time.
- **Recognize capacity limitations:** Finding the right people to collaborate with us takes time. And once we do, we tend to over-rely on particular individuals who serve as links between groups or key liaisons, leading to burnout. Sometimes we don't have time to collect and synthesize data and develop proposals. We can have good ideas but not enough people and money to implement them. We also have to face the different capacities that people have to engage.
- **Be aware of continuity:** It is hard to know how to create continuity and how to keep people interested and passionate over time. We don't have succession, in the sense that we don't have people mentoring new people. An additional challenge is to analyze results over time and track successes and challenges.
- **Create tangible benefits:** Academic research doesn't always bring benefits to partner communities. How do we make knowledge creation and mobilization relevant to these communities and their contexts?
- **Adaptability:** Not every collaborator has the capacity to adapt, we think this might be linked to certain fair to change how things are done.

ii) Reviewing the guiding principles

The second main theme that was discussed in the breakout sessions was guided by providing participants with a list of the principles for transdisciplinary research and practice that have been developed so far by our community of practice. After giving people time to read and examine the list of principles, they were asked to share and make comments about them for our consideration and revision. The summary of this second theme is divided into three parts: i) general comments, ii) revisions, and iii) additions.



General comments:

- Principles should be easy to interpret/ understand standalone, without any accompanying text.
- Principles should be synthesized; they are too wordy, and the language is not accessible.
- The list is too long and broad.
- We should not number the principles because it seems like they are ranked.
- A lot of principles could be combined but then they would get too wordy.
- Principle 7 stands out, conflict can bring good ideas, and conflict is important in co-management.
- Principle 8 stands out; it is especially relevant.
- It is not clear who are the principles for. They seem particularly unclear to someone outside academia, some terms such as community leads, or institutional change are not accessible.
- Principles should imply or make more clear how (in what way) they are interconnected.
- In order to support the idea of each principle, we could make use of iconography, such as symbols or pictures that support the principles' main messages.
- Some “principles” are more about how to do things than principles, they seem more action-oriented than principles.
- Make clear that the principles are about research and practice, about partnerships, and about showing a good way to conduct the work.
- Reflect if it is expected for a single person to do all of the principles. The idea is to have a team work together.



Suggestions for revisions of current principles included:

- Some principles can be condensed, for example, principles 1, 2, 4 and 6. They all talk about partnership, relationships, and community.
- Principles 1, 2, 4 and 6 are key. The rest derive from those.
- Principles 1 and 9 are similar.
- Add to principle 2 something about valuing.
- Principle 4 stood out, economic aspects are important, and we should incorporate them with social justice.
- 5 and 6 are too similar.
- Principle 5 is unclear. How do you transfer knowledge?
- Why use the word *careful* in principle 8? Might give the sense that we should be scared or overly cautious.

- Principle 8: communicating and developing a relationship with the land, not only the people.
- Principle 10 should be reworded and include that we should welcome ways of knowing and being inclusive.
- It is unclear what principle 12 means.
- 11 is important, but at the same time, it can be captured in principles 1 or 2.
- 13 and 12 could be combined. For what do we engage?
- 13 could fit in principle 3 (systemic and integrated thinking).

Additions to current principles and new principles were offered:

- How we should not only build relationships with people but also with the land.
- New principles: Address Reconciliation, honoring diversity, and inclusion.
- Add something about intergenerational change and working with children.
- Maybe adding something about learning opportunities derived from failure.
- Address being open to vulnerability: add it to principle 7.
- Highlight collective and community-oriented outlooks.
- Recognize history and context.
- Include a principle about transparent processes.
- Remark that we should finish projects in a good way and maintain long-term relationships when possible.
- Principles need to highlight the importance of culture and language.
- Recognize the importance of relationship-building funding-wise and academic-wise.
- We should rewrite principles to clearly show that we should work towards transformative change (instead of institutional change).
- Add that we have to find points of connection, being mindful of why are you there and who you are.
- Add something about developing a safe space.
- Key principles: communication, transparency, clear and regular communication every step of the way.
- Add something about how the communication should be audience-oriented, and appropriate.
- Find a way to explain what brings all principles together.



- Creating an infographic to show the principles might be an easier way to communicate them.
- We need a principle about understanding the context before you come, which might fall under principle 2.
- A principle about how to work within institutional and context boundaries and move across different scales whenever possible

iii) Addressing training requirements

Finally, in the last discussion of the day, participants were asked to discuss in small groups what are some training needs for working well together. The goal was to identify what kind of training is missing but also for whom is needed (students, researchers, practitioners). The reflections of this session are summarized below:

- Provide access to training, especially for students. Not everyone gets access to the same experiences before graduate school, for example. Training is sometimes just experienced, and not something that you teach.
- Give young practitioners and students information about the organizations and options available.
- Train people according to their skills and interests. Think of all the people who need the same set of skills.
- Learn skills for conflict resolution, how to engage with partners for the first time, facilitating meetings, communication, and observation.
- Build a network to connect and have casual networking events.
- When possible, it is important to have a team, so we don't have to be alone.
- It is important to have mentorship opportunities, which could also lead to succession or transition planning.
- All collaborators should be provided training about how to bring diverse people together and build trust.
- Provide training on how to create and incorporate photo-video material.
- Note that training students goes beyond doing research.
- Provide training in finding funding and grant writing.
- Offer opportunities to understand local political systems and local protocols.
- Teach how to practice reflexivity, self-reflection, and understanding our positionality.
- Provide training in how to use appropriate language, cultural awareness, and sensibilization to local protocols.
- Provide spaces for students to learn by observation.
- Change the structures of research theses so they highlight benefits to communities.
- Indigenous Peoples should be represented in students' committees so they can guide students and help them how to collect relevant data that will benefit communities.



Indicators of success in transdisciplinary research

After the discussions, all participants engaged in a session where they were invited to share their ideas about how could we know we are doing transdisciplinary research and practice. For this, we asked all participants to share what they think are tools or information that we could use as indicators of success in transdisciplinary research.

Fourteen potential indicators were identified:

- Enduring partnership.
- Expansion of partnerships.
- There are tangible improvements in the communities.
- Increased awareness about the project outside the project's partners.
- Foundational principles are represented in education.
- Healthy ecosystems and recovery of species.
- People feel benefited and see the value of projects.
- Ongoing or increased funding.
- Improved local agency for dealing with sustainability problems.
- Local knowledge is present.
- There are intergenerational changes.
- We can sustain the projects over time.
- Knowledge contribution by Indigenous Peoples is reflected in research outputs.
- Knowledge is disseminated in a relevant way.

Ways to stay connected

As a closing exercise, we listed as a group the ways in which we could stay in touch and connect with one another and with this, keep building a network of collaborators. Some of these final reflections were:

- We want to connect more often.
- Have a newsletter.
- Connect Indigenous and local kids with nature.
- Connect mentors and university students.
- Have a database of research opportunities/ideas.
- Match students with projects
- Improve communication channels and better disseminate the projects.
- Plan for student visits and local people visits Biosphere Regions so they can learn about the landscape.
- Have a program of mentoring for high school students.

