02/12/2024

Dear Members of the Research Ethics Board,

**Request for Ethics Approval for Research Interviews with Indigenous Communities**

My name is Moses Elleason, a doctoral student in the Faculty of Natural Resources Management at Lakehead University. I am writing to request your approval to conduct interviews with Indigenous communities in Ontario as part of my research titled “Forest Change and Wildlife Conservation: Insights from Indigenous Communities in Ontario.”

This research is being conducted under the supervision of Associate Professor Brian McLaren, who has secured funding from the Ontario Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks (MECP) to develop caribou habitat management strategies for the Slate Islands in collaboration with the Biigtigong First Nation. Expanding on this project, I have been awarded additional funding from the Digital Research Alliance of Canada (DRAC) to broaden the scope, examining forest and habitat changes through the perspectives of traditional knowledge holders across a wider audience.

Below, I have provided a summary of the study information. I kindly request your review and approval to proceed with interviews, ensuring adherence to ethical standards and respect for the communities involved. Thank you for your time and consideration.

**Study Purpose**

This study aims to explore traditional knowledge holders’ perspectives on forest change in Ontario, focusing on its impacts on biodiversity and sustainable management. It seeks to document traditional knowledge on forest changes and biodiversity, analyze ecological insights related to ecosystems and land cover, and assess the cultural, socio-economic, and spiritual significance of forests to the Lake Superior area First Nations and members of the Métis Nation of Ontario associating with Lake Superior communities. The research will also examine community-led conservation practices and recommend strategies to integrate Indigenous perspectives into sustainable forest and wildlife management, promoting culturally informed and inclusive conservation approaches

**Methods**

Data Collection

The study will be conducted in Ontario, focusing on the Lake Superior area First Nations and members of the Métis Nation of Ontario associating with Lake Superior communities. Semi-structured interviews will be used to gather qualitative insights from 40 participants between January and February 2025.

Data Analysis

Using the NVivo software package, interview responses will be analyzed thematically, identifying patterns such as community concerns about management and policy gaps or socio-cultural connections to specific species. The analysis will utilize a "Descriptive-focused coding" strategy, adhering to the principles of OCAP® (Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession) as outlined by First Nations to ensure that the recorded data is correctly represented. Indigenous knowledge of forest plant species and land types (e.g., "Black Spruce–Birch transitions") will be integrated with ecological data using GIS and remote sensing technology to create visual representations of forest dynamics, focusing on regions like the Slate Islands Provincial Park.

**Benefits to society**

This research will enhance our understanding of forest dynamics from traditional knowledge holders’ perspective by documenting Indigenous observations of ecosystem changes, complementing scientific data with indigenous knowledge for a comprehensive view of drivers and impacts. Community-suggested policy changes will be highlighted to ensure better integration of Indigenous perspectives into sustainable forest and wildlife management strategies. Hence inform wildlife conservation by examining how forest changes affect species like caribou and moose, aiding in targeted strategies that support biodiversity and Indigenous livelihoods. The forest change maps that will be created will have coding that is understandable to Indigenous people resident in Lake Superior forests. Furthermore, this study seeks to promote Indigenous-led conservation and co-management models in Ontario. It will strengthen Canada’s contribution to collaborative approaches aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals, including SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequality), SDG 15 (Life on Land), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). Also, it will contribute to interdisciplinary academic advancements in resource management.

**Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession of research data**

This research follows the First Nations Principles of OCAP® (Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession) to ensure that your knowledge and perspectives are respected and safeguarded throughout the process.

The knowledge you share belongs to you and your community. The research recognizes this and respects the collective ownership of your data. Also, you have the right to decide how your knowledge is collected, analyzed, and used. You will be informed at every stage of the project and can guide the process to ensure it aligns with your community’s values and priorities. You and your community will have access to the research findings at the end of the study. You will be given opportunities to review and offer input on how the results are presented and shared. In addition, all data will be stored securely and handled in a way that reflects your community’s cultural values. For the time being, the data will remain accessible only to the researcher (Moses Elleason), the supervisor (Brian McLaren), and co-supervisor (Dr. Lance Robinson). Besides sharing with you, the data will be stored on a secure computer and Google Drive and deleted five years after the thesis completion. This is to ensure your knowledge remains protected and used responsibly. The collected data will be used for academic purposes only, including policy recommendations. With your permission, a summary report of the findings on forest changes, their impacts on wildlife, and policy recommendations based on your perspectives will be shared with the Digital Research Alliance of Canada (DRAC) and submitted to an open-access journal for publication.

**Researcher Contact Information**

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**Community Engagement and Collaboration Plan**

This research employs a collaborative approach rooted in the First Nations Principles of OCAP® (Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession) and CARE (Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, Ethics) Principles to guide and monitor engagement with Indigenous communities.

The study builds on a project funded by the Ontario Ministry of Environment, Conservation, and Parks, which focuses on classifying forest habitats on the Slate Islands using Indigenous knowledge. This initiative was designed in consultation with the Chief and Council of Biigtigong Nishnaabeg First Nation. Expanding this scope, the current research addresses interests from additional community members, including the Métis Nation of Ontario. Initial engagements emphasized the importance of documenting Indigenous knowledge on forest changes and their effects on wildlife.

To ensure inclusivity, the research integrates a consent form and co-design of interview questions with Indigenous communities, respecting cultural values and priorities. Regular feedback sessions will occur after data collection and analysis to update participants on progress and findings. Post-research engagement will allow communities to review and approve findings before submission to the Digital Research Alliance of Canada (DRAC) and any open-access publications.

As clearly stated on the consent form (following the OCAP® and CARE protocols), the knowledge shared remains the collective property of participants and their communities. Participants control how their knowledge is collected, analyzed, and used. Findings will be accessible to communities and handled in alignment with cultural values. Data will be stored securely by the researcher (Moses Elleason), supervisor (Brian McLaren), and co-supervisor (Dr. Lance Robinson), with deletion scheduled five years after thesis completion. The research aims solely to inform academic and policy recommendations, ensuring responsible use and protection of shared knowledge.

**Effect or impact Aboriginal (FNMI) peoples as an "incidental" representative group in research**

This research will provide significant benefits to Indigenous communities by enhancing our understanding of forest dynamics through the lens of the Lake Superior area First Nations and members of the Métis Nation of Ontario associating with Lake Superior communities. It will document Indigenous observations of ecosystem changes, integrating these insights with scientific data to create a holistic understanding of drivers and impacts. Community-suggested policy changes will be highlighted to better incorporate Indigenous perspectives into sustainable forest and wildlife management strategies. The study will inform wildlife conservation by examining the effects of forest changes on species such as caribou and moose, facilitating targeted strategies that support biodiversity and Indigenous livelihoods. Forest change maps will feature coding understandable to Indigenous communities in the Lake Superior Forest region, ensuring accessibility and relevance. Furthermore, this research promotes Indigenous-led conservation and co-management models in Ontario, strengthening collaborative approaches aligned with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequality), SDG 15 (Life on Land), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). By prioritizing Indigenous knowledge, this work fosters cultural preservation, community empowerment, and equitable conservation outcomes, contributing to both local resource management and interdisciplinary academic advancements.

**LAY DESCRIPTION: Provide a brief lay-word summary of the proposed project (40 words or less, similar to the statement you would prepare for a granting agency for public dissemination)**

This study explores Indigenous perspectives on forest change in Ontario, its impacts on biodiversity, and sustainable management. It documents traditional knowledge, assesses cultural significance, analyzes ecological insights, and promotes Indigenous-led conservation practices for inclusive, culturally informed wildlife and forest management.

**Summary of Purpose of Research**

This research seeks to examine the perspectives of traditional knowledge holders in Ontario regarding forest change, its impacts on biodiversity, and approaches for sustainable forest and wildlife management. The study will focus on the Lake Superior area, specifically within First Nations and Métis communities, exploring how Indigenous knowledge contributes to understanding ecological changes, the effects on wildlife (mainly caribou, moose, and deer), and the broader cultural and socio-economic implications. The primary aim of the study is to document and analyze Indigenous knowledge (IK) regarding forest changes and their impact on biodiversity, particularly key wildlife species. Indigenous communities have long-held expertise in managing natural resources, and their insights offer valuable perspectives on forest ecosystems and the transformation of land cover. This research will highlight the importance of preserving indigenous knowledge and its potential role in sustainable environmental management.

Key objectives of the study include: (1) documenting traditional knowledge on forest changes and their effects on caribou, moose, and deer populations, (2) analyzing indigenous knowledge related to forest ecosystems, forest plant species, and land cover transformations, (3) assessing the cultural, socio-economic, and spiritual significance of forests and wildlife for Lake Superior area First Nations and Métis communities, (4) exploring community-led conservation practices, and (5) recommending strategies for integrating Indigenous perspectives into sustainable forest and wildlife management policies. Through these objectives, the research aims to better understand how Indigenous communities in Ontario have historically and currently engage with forest and wildlife conservation, particularly in the face of environmental change. By highlighting community-led practices and perspectives, the study will contribute to a more inclusive approach to conservation, ensuring that Indigenous knowledge is integrated into contemporary resource management and policy development.

The central research question guiding this study is: How do traditional knowledge holders in the Lake Superior area perceive forest changes, and what are their perspectives on its impacts on biodiversity and wildlife, as well as strategies for sustainable forest and wildlife management? By exploring this question, the research seeks to promote the integration of Indigenous knowledge into contemporary conservation practices and contribute to the development of policies that are both ecologically sustainable and culturally meaningful.

**Research participants**

The participants of this research will be limited to individuals across various age groups—youths (18-24), adults (25-64), and seniors (65 and above)—from the Lake Superior area First Nations and members of the Métis Nation of Ontario associating with Lake Superior communities. The study aims to engage 40 participants in total.

**INFORMED CONSENT: Clearly outline the measures that will be used to ensure the informed consent of all research participant**

Before Participants are invited to voluntarily share their perspectives on forest changes, biodiversity, and conservation practices, a written consent form outlining the purpose, process, rights, and expectations of participation in simple, accessible language will be provided. Participants will be offered the opportunity to ask questions for clarification before providing consent.

Voluntary participation will be emphasized, including the fact that participants can withdraw or decline to answer questions without any negative consequences.

Participants will be informed on how the data will be collected, stored, analyzed, and shared, adhering to OCAP® principles to respect Indigenous knowledge and community values. They will also be informed about how findings will be used, including publications or shared reports.

Participants will be allowed to explicitly consent to specific elements, such as audio recording, identification, or sharing data with DRAC, through a "YES" or "NO" checkbox system.

Participants will be made aware that the data will be stored securely on encrypted platforms with access limited to researcher (Moses Elleason), supervisor (Dr. Brian McLaren), and co-supervisor (Dr. Lance Robinson).

Participants will be given updates on research progress and opportunities to review and provide feedback on findings before final publication.

**ANONYMITY and/or CONFIDENTIALITY**

The research does not require personal data, such as names or gender, unless participants choose to provide it voluntarily on the questionnaire. Both name and gender are entirely optional and are not key to the research objectives. A data sharing agreement will be developed and maintained to ensure all data collected are securely stored on encrypted platforms, with access restricted to the researcher (Moses Elleason), supervisor (Dr. Brian McLaren), and co-supervisor (Dr. Lance Robinson) during the study.