

Contribution to the PAMEB discussion on January 20, 2002

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In the most recent research project that I worked I was interested in examining both species specific plant knowledge and knowledge about plant assemblages. I knew that people named things at a specific level but was not sure if there were words (categories) at a cognitive level equal to what we might call habitats / vegetation types / plant assemblages.

In order to do this I thought that we would start with the Forest Ecosystem Classification which nicely breaks the forest into vegetation types and eco-sites. Vegetation types based on 10x10 plot scale and eco-sites on the scale of stands. We would go out with knowledgeable elders chosen by the community along with community researchers and look at the plants in the plots and see what names they would use for the assemblage. It quickly became apparent that this was not how the elders were comfortable talking about the "bush". What was the problem? Mid-stream the elders suggested a change in the methodology. I would articulate what I was interested in and they would then decide where we should go so that they could teach me about that topic. This methodology makes sense, as I understand it, since knowledge about things is not abstract but related to actual experience with the beings of a place. In other words, people know about the places where they have spent time and do not feel comfortable talking about other peoples' places. This goes along with the ethic of respect where you always acknowledge those who have spent time on the land in a particular area before you do anything like go and hunt something, trap something, pick a plant, talk about that place, etc. Knowledge inheres in the beings of the land itself. Due to the ways that the trapline system and settlement occurred in Ontario there is often a linkage between traplines and the areas about which people are willing to speak. Other places are known as family hunting territories, ranchos, etc.

To get back to methodology, people wanted to take me to places where they held the authority and legitimacy to speak about the topics about which I asked. This was relevant for both plant names and other broader topics. As it turns out, at a higher scale, people I work with have sophisticated vocabulary to describe different types of forest. Are these then categories? I don't think they think of them as categories in the same way that we do. That is because while two types of forest might be the same, the cultural history of the two places can be distinct. The knowledge system itself moves away from generalising and universalising concepts and categories toward embedding knowledge into specific places and people. This creates quite a challenge as the production of generalised knowledge, indicators, categories etc. undermines the knowledge system of the local people. People with whom we work are very unwilling to have their knowledge broken up and inserted into "management" processes. The Anishinaabe resource law of Treaty #3 territory reflects this basic principle of the knowledge system. All resource management is to be based upon the trapline in order to respect those people who know the land the best.

I think one of the first tasks of any biodiversity assessment that works with local communities is to understand the knowledge system. For instance, in Mexico where I have worked with the Tarahumara, they also follow similar principles in that they respect those who inhabit a rancho. Often these follow kinship lines but not always. Respect should be paid to these cultural systems by always working with those who are held as knowledgeable about certain areas. Likewise, management prescriptions should not be foisted upon these areas. Collective ideas about biodiversity have to be webbed together as people from these different areas talk. To intersect with the discussion about what is a community. As I noted about the Anishinaabe resource law - although people may identify with a community it does not mean that the community holds

authority. All indigenous communities I have worked with have always directed me to work with specific people. When the community wants to generate a collective vision they do so through much negotiation.

What I usually end up with, and only after a couple of years when I understand the knowledge system, is methodologies which are quite hybridised. Sometimes we document the species and habitats of a place, sometimes we design methodologies which answer specific questions about a specific species.

To summarise and bring my thoughts back to methodology. People can carry out field tasks of scientific methodologies. Such processes can generate information respected by scientists and other institutions. Sometimes local communities need to engage in those processes as they interact with the state. However, local knowledge systems often place different priorities on authority and legitimacy of knowledge. This is often decentralised even beyond what have become communities. If we are to respect such knowledge systems we need to adapt our methodologies so that they respect those who hold authority to speak about such areas and topics. Often our methodologies break ethical criteria of local knowledge systems. The knowledge generated by such a process cannot be authoritative in a local context.

Likewise, what I find interesting is that people on the land are assessing things. However, the way they present their observations has little authoritative weight among the state managers and many researchers. I feel my biggest challenge is to find methodologies that respect the local knowledge system while trying to find ways to articulate the knowledge so it can engage other resource management processes.

Having said all that, there is one indicator to which we pay close attention: access to, and presence on, the land of local peoples. If there is no access to the land, and if local peoples have stopped having a presence on the land, then there is not much local biodiversity assessment occurring.