

## **Practical Involvement of Indigenous Peoples in Environmental Monitoring**

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MVEIRB: [www.mveirb.nt.ca](http://www.mveirb.nt.ca)

### **Abstract**

Environmental monitoring is a requirement built into the regulatory regime in the Northwest Territories. Provision for environmental monitoring is enshrined both in the Mackenzie Valley Resource Management Act and in legally-binding agreements between diamond mine companies and federal and territorial governments and aboriginal groups. Oversight is provided by environmental watchdog agencies established by these Environmental Agreements. All these monitoring agencies are comprised of a majority of aboriginal members or trusted technical experts appointed by aboriginal groups. They work at arms length from the mine developer and government. The agencies can use their influence to lobby for TEK-based monitoring and research programs relating to individual mines. A monitoring agency that scrutinizes a developer's monitoring reports can also serve as an early warning of impending environmental problems that the company can then act to mitigate before adverse impacts are too far advanced. Air and water quality, aquatic biota, wildlife populations and acid rock drainage are annually monitored and reported on by the diamond mine companies.

Wolverine surveys, monitoring of fish and caribou health, mitigation of impacts to caribou, and road monitoring all currently benefit from the practical use of aboriginal knowledge and traditional land-use methods. Dene TEK and traditional hunting rules can also enlighten the sport hunting industry, where the tendency to select the largest and/or oldest animals for sport harvest is contradictory to Dene practise.

A collaborative approach to evaluating the effectiveness of monitoring programs has been in practice for several years in the case of the EKATI mine. Annual workshops are held in Yellowknife at which the results of the BHP-Billiton's yearly monitoring efforts are presented, subjecting them to the scrutiny of aboriginal groups, government regulators and the Independent Environmental Monitoring Agency. These workshops have been widely

recognized as an effective method of bringing the ideas of all stakeholders to bear on issues of immediate and foreseeable environmental concern at the mine.

Challenges exist in the area of effective consultation and communication with aboriginal communities in the N.W.T. Examples of inaccurate translation between English and Dene languages illustrate how serious misunderstandings can easily occur about the full depth of TEK or about the true effects of mining activity.

Cumulative effects monitoring has also had its share of difficulties in arriving at common ground among mining companies, government and Aboriginal Peoples. Should government be mandated with the task of monitoring the regional cumulative impacts of the diamond mines in the N.W.T.? Should mine companies provide resources to monitor the regional cumulative impacts to which each individual mine may contribute?

**Key Words:** environmental monitoring, aboriginal, Traditional Knowledge, communication, independence