



## **Kluane Research Summits: Fostering reconciliation, relationships, and two-way knowledge mobilization**

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## **Executive Summary**

Due to its environmental uniqueness, cultural richness, and vulnerability to change, Northern Canada has attracted southern-based researchers (in both natural and social/health sciences) for decades. Although some of the relationships between these researchers and community members have been positive and rewarding, many have been strained, challenging, or nonexistent. Despite an increased awareness, acceptance, and action towards reconciliation across the country, researchers and community members are very much still engaged in the process of jointly learning how to mend and build relationships, as well as communicate effectively and respectfully. This position paper presents one successful way in which researchers and community members of the Kluane region in southwest Yukon have come together to do just that. In 2018, a volunteer committee composed of both First Nation and non-First Nation community members, and two southern-based researchers, organized a local 'Research Summit' with the goals of fostering relationship-building, cross-cultural knowledge sharing, and capacity-building. The Summit was very well attended, and generated positive feedback and support for continued and regular gatherings of this kind. A SSHRC Indigenous Research Capacity and Reconciliation Connection Grant was subsequently received to host a second, consecutive 'Research Summit' at Kluane. This paper highlights the approach and lessons learned from organizing and carrying out these Research Summits, with particular focus on the themes of engaging Indigenous Knowledge, mobilizing knowledge and partnerships for reconciliation, and fostering mutually respectful, responsible, and reciprocal relationships. We take the position that researchers and communities require support (time, human resources and funding) to intentionally spend time together mending and building relationships, as well as learning from each other respectfully and in a way that consciously addresses and attempts to balance existing knowledge power dynamics (i.e., where science and Indigenous knowledge are valued equally).

## **Kluane Research Summits: Fostering reconciliation, relationships, and two-way knowledge mobilization**

### **Introduction**

Relationships between researchers and community members in northern Canada are often complex and influenced by a legacy of colonialism, differences in culture, and different ways of knowing (Davis et al., 2017; Morton Ninomiya & Pollock, 2017). Reconciliation and reciprocity in research is critical for sharing and advancing knowledge in mutually beneficial and respectful ways (Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008; Stefanelli, et al., 2017; Smith, 1999). In recent years – and with increased awareness, acceptance, and action towards reconciliation in Canada – communication and relationships between researchers (in natural science and social/health science) and Yukon First Nations and communities are improving (Saxinger, 2018). However, communities and researchers are very much still engaged in the process of jointly learning how to both mend and build relationships, as well as communicate effectively and respectfully (Morton Ninomiya & Pollock, 2017; Saxinger, 2018). It is critical that safe, collaborative spaces be supported by the broader research system and community to enable ongoing relationship-building, cross-cultural knowledge sharing, and capacity-building if we are to move toward reconciliation.

In the Kluane Lake region of southwest Yukon, relationships between researchers and community members have a lengthy and unique history involving the development of the Alaska Highway, self-government agreements, the governance of Kluane National Park, and the long-term presence of a southern-operated research station (Nakoochee, 2018; Nesper, 2018). Increasingly evident and dramatic climatic changes in the area are drawing growing numbers of researchers, including many who are new to the area, to study these changes (Dearborn & Danby, 2018). At the same time, local First Nations and other decision-making bodies have expressed their interest in improving their capacity to both engage in environmental research in their region and effectively access and use research outputs in their decision-making (Fallon & Paquette, 2012; MPWGSC, 2003).

With this in mind, a volunteer planning committee composed of members of the local community (Kluane First Nation councillors, citizens and staff members, and members of the Dän Keyi Renewable Resources Council) and two researchers with longstanding interests and relationships in the area, organized the 2018 Lhù'ààn Mân – Kluane Lake Research Summit to

promote relationship-building and two-way knowledge sharing<sup>1</sup>. The Summit planning committee received strong feedback indicating the importance and need for such gatherings, including suggestions for a follow-up Research Summit. In response, the team applied for funding from the SSHRC Indigenous Research Capacity and Reconciliation Connection Grants to host a second Research Summit at Kluane, which is planned for early summer 2019.

This paper draws on our experience from the 2018 Lhù'ààn Mân – Kluane Lake Research Summit, and sets the stage for a second consecutive Research Summit. We highlight our approach and lessons learned in organizing and carrying out these Research Summits in response to community interests, with particular focus on the following themes: engaging Indigenous knowledge, mobilizing knowledge and partnerships for reconciliation, and fostering mutually respectful, responsible, and reciprocal relationships. We take the position that researchers and communities require support (time, human resources and funding) to intentionally spend time together mending and building relationships, as well as learning from each other respectfully and in a way that consciously addresses and attempts to balance existing knowledge power dynamics (i.e., where science and Indigenous knowledge are valued equally).

### **Context and history of research in the Kluane Region**

Lhù'ààn Mân Këyi (Kluane Lake country) and Lhù'ààn Mân Ku Da'n (Kluane Lake People) have always known change. Nestled between the glaciated and rugged St. Elias and Kluane mountain ranges to the west and the gentler Ruby mountain range to the east, rests the largest lake in Yukon: Lhù'ààn Mân (Kluane Lake). Boreal forest blankets the valley bottoms, with treeline at around 1400m of elevation, above which one finds dynamic alpine environments and glaciers. The watershed is relatively pristine with limited human and industrial activity. Lhù'ààn Mân is located within Kluane First Nation Traditional Territory and borders the Kluane National Park and Reserve. Approximately 150 residents currently live within the Kluane watershed, most of which are located in the towns of Burwash Landing, Destruction Bay, and Silver City.

The Kluane landscape is dynamic, and has seen many changes over time. Particularly, glacial fed streams and rivers are constantly carving out valleys and depositing till, creating hydrologic and landscape-scale shifts that can shift rapidly and dramatically. Oral history and geologic records offer complementary accounts of dramatic change occurring with both the surging and retreating of nearby glaciers (Cruikshank, 2005). The most recent example is the 2016 diversion

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<sup>1</sup> A detailed summary of the summit is publicly available online at <http://yfwmb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Summary-Report-FINAL-2018.pdf>. It includes a synopsis of presentations and workshops, resulting outcomes, and a list of recommendations for potential future summits.

of the A'ąy Chù (Slims River) – the meltwater from the massive Kaskawulsh glacier – due to glacial recession (Shugar et al., 2017; 2018). Formerly the primary source of freshwater for Lhù'ààn Mân, this meltwater now drains south into the Alsek watershed and away from the lake (Shugar et al., 2017; 2018).

In addition to, and partially as a consequence of, these glacial and fluvial shifts, residents of local communities and Lhù'ààn Mân Ku Da'n are witnessing changes to lake levels, increasing dust emissions, and degrading permafrost. Collectively, these changes are raising concerns over valued habitat for fish and wildlife, and impacts to traditional lifestyles and livelihoods. With less snow, more rain-on-snow events, and lower lake levels, climate change is also affecting the local community's ability to access key areas for trapping, fishing and harvesting plants and animals.

This dynamic, rapidly changing environment has held the attention of community members and southern-based researchers alike (in the fields of both natural and social/health sciences) for years (Pittock, Finlayson, & Linke, 2018; Shugar et al., 2017; 2018). Although the shift in the A'ąy Chù has notably increased both research and local interests in the surrounding environment, researchers and community members have been studying the Kluane watershed since the 1950s (Bryans, 1972; Harris, 1990; Nickling, 1978; Sawada & Johnson, 2000). In 1961, after the construction of the Alaska Highway, the Arctic Institute of North America established a base at the southern end of Lhù'ààn Mân: the Kluane Lake Research Station (Danby, Williams & Hick, 2014). The station became the field base for scientists and graduate students working in glaciology, meteorology, climatology, geophysics and glacial geology, and quickly expanded its programming into 14 different research fields (Danby, Williams & Hick, 2014). The facility has since become a center point for ecological research on Canada's boreal forests. Yet, in spite of the longstanding and wide-ranging research interests in the area, to date, only a limited number of researchers have worked directly with the local communities to build on their local and Indigenous knowledge and work towards addressing key concerns relating to the human dimensions of climate change. Historically, "Kluane people complain that the vast majority of these researchers come in the summer, stay only a short time and are never heard from again." (Nadasdy, 2003: 22).

Our collaborative efforts to co-organize Research Summits at Kluane aim to shift this trend toward one that supports long-term research relationships, develops local capacity to participate in different types of research, effectively engages Indigenous knowledge, and is responsive to northern interests and 'ways of doing, being and knowing'. We are bringing together the long-term interests of scientists who have been working in the area – some for several decades – and the interests of community members who have their own research questions and needs. These summits aim to increase engagement and build momentum toward

the development of research tools (e.g., community research protocol, interactive research database) and local capacity to engage in research, while also increasing the awareness and active participation of researchers as supportive collaborators in this community-driven process.

## **2018 Lhù'ààn Mân – Kluane Lake Research Summit**

### *Background*

The diversion of the A'ąy Chù in 2016 prompted discussion and concern from the local communities, was followed by significant media coverage, and attracted even greater attention to the region by various research interests. This confluence of events prompted many discussions in the region, and led to the emergence of an idea to host a Research Summit. The 2018 Lhù'ààn Mân – Kluane Lake Research Summit was intended as an initial step towards improving communication and relationships between researchers and local communities and identifying shared interests that may begin to address local concerns about Kluane lands and waters.

A voluntary Planning Committee formed early in 2018, including Kluane First Nation councillors, citizens, and staff members; members of the Dän Keyi Renewable Resources Council; and two select researchers. Working under firm budget and resource constraints, the Planning Committee creatively pooled resources to engage a Summit Facilitator and identify additional resourcing needs through in-kind contributions and donations from community and academic partners. The decision to host the inaugural Kluane Lake Research Summit was announced early in the spring of 2018.

To maximize participation from and benefits to the local communities, the Planning Committee gave careful consideration to the Summit venue, meals, dates, format, and presenters. Hosting the event on a Friday and Saturday encouraged greater participation by local community members. Creating space for community-members-only dialogue was intended to encourage local voices in comfortable and open expression. Invitations were made to all community members residing within Kluane First Nation Traditional Territory in the region with no limit placed on the number of community members who wished to attend.

In addition, recognizing the diverse range of research interests in the Kluane region, the Planning Committee made the difficult decision to prioritize Summit presentations relating specifically to Kluane Lake research. This seemed most relevant, given that the conversations and research interests resulting from the A'ąy Chù diversion were focused on direct and indirect impacts to the lake and watershed. Invitations were made to known researchers – from

both academia and government – who are active in this field of research. Firmly committed to hosting a non-technical research Summit that would encourage community participation, presenters were asked for plain-language abstracts and presentations. The Planning Committee also reached out to key individuals involved in relevant research initiatives who were invited to set up information booths for the duration of the Summit. Requests to present at the Summit exceeded the time available for presentations; as such, an expanded scope of research topics might be considered for future events.

The 2018 Lhù'ààn Mân-Kluane Lake Research Summit brought together Yukon and First Nations leaders, researchers from both government and academia, and members of the local communities and First Nations. Jointly, participants engaged in the process of relationship-building and two-way knowledge sharing about the region's land- and water-scapes, focusing on the overarching theme of Kluane Lake itself. The Summit's objectives were to:

1. Promote reciprocal relationship building and two-way knowledge sharing between researchers and community members about lake-related interests and research;
2. Invite researchers to respectfully and responsibly learn about and visit Kluane communities with Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) (Hanna & Vanclay, 2013) of Kluane First Nation;
3. Identify community-based research priorities and community expectations of researchers working and studying in Äsi Keyi (our grandfather's land).

### *Summary*

For two windy days in May 2018, community members from the Kluane region and researchers from across Canada came together to share their knowledge of and interests in Lhù'ààn Mân (Kluane Lake). The Summit encouraged two-way learning opportunities among delegates through presentations, dialogue and activities. Researchers active in the area shared their research findings with the community on Day 1 and were invited to learn more about the people and history of the region on the morning of Day 2. The research presentations provided community members with an overview of the type of research occurring in their homelands, and an opportunity to connect directly with researchers. On the morning of Day 2, while researchers were on a local guided tour of Kluane, community members engaged in a dialogue to begin identifying how research may best serve community needs and further local interests in research. Thereafter, the two groups reconvened and engaged in a cross-cultural dialogue to explore shared research interests and seek out new approaches for better research outcomes.

A number of key recommendations resulted from the 2018 Summit to advance research in Kluane. Several relate to the importance of cross-cultural relationship-building:

1. Both researchers and community members should commit to engaging in cross-cultural and reciprocal learning.
2. It is essential to support increased communication and opportunities for interaction between research communities and local communities.
3. Where possible, research projects should make efforts to support cultural revitalization.
4. Both parties should aim to work on mutually-beneficial research projects.

Additional recommendations relate to the importance of creating a supportive research environment:

5. Researchers should work towards making existing knowledge, data, and information more accessible to communities.
6. Research focused on local ecologies can benefit from increased engagement and FPIC with First Nations and community members, and the sharing of empirical observations.
7. Research should continue to include Indigenous knowledge in respectful and complementary ways.
8. Kluane First Nation should be supported in developing policies and guidelines for research with Indigenous knowledge.
9. It would be useful for Kluane First Nation to develop an introductory course on the history, knowledge and people of Kluane for researchers (i.e., KFN 101)

### **2019 Kluane Research Summit**

Feedback from the 2018 Research Summit at Kluane indicated that there was unanimous support, both from the community and researchers, for continued (perhaps even annual) events of this kind. It was concluded that the benefits from continued and productive conversations between these two groups was well worth the time and effort from both parties to organize, travel to, and participate in the Summit.

The 2018 Lhù'ààn Mân – Kluane Lake Research Summit was pieced together with limited financial and human resources. To increase the viability of a second Summit in 2019, funding was secured from SSHRC to support the continuation of the important conversation that is already underway, by bringing together Indigenous knowledge holders, community members (First Nation and non-First Nation), representatives of local, territorial and federal governments, and natural and social scientists. Participants will identify strategies for respecting and blending different knowledge types, ultimately working towards reconciling and strengthening the relationships between all researchers and community members.



The format of the 2019 Research Summit (scheduled for the end of May 2019) will be similar to 2018, with time and space for researchers and community members to present research and knowledge, as well as share information and semi-structure conversations regarding knowledge and research. Similarly to last year, topics explored will include actual research topics and knowledge, but also conversations about the research and knowledge gathering/sharing process and how it can be improved. For example:

- *What is research?*
- *How do western knowledge and Indigenous knowledge interact?*
- *What do community members expect from researchers and what do researchers expect from community members?*
- *What are the goals we are moving towards and how can we get there?*

In parallel, Kluane First Nation is currently working on developing its own “Research Protocol”, a set of guidelines and agreements that will be used to engage with researchers as they plan, undertake, and report back on research within KFN Traditional Territory. An initial workshop specific to this protocol will take place in conjunction with the 2019 Research Summit due to the complimentary nature of the topics and interest from both researchers and community members in the protocol development.

### **Kluane Research Summits: Engaging Indigenous Knowledge, Mobilizing Partnerships for Reconciliation, and Fostering Mutually Respectful, Responsible, and Reciprocal Relationships**

The Kluane Research Summits are designed to promote equal, two-way knowledge sharing. This implies equal respect for western science and Indigenous knowledge; it requires an understanding from all parties that both ways of knowing are equally valuable and ‘true’, although one form of knowledge may be more appropriate to address specific questions than the other, depending on context. In order for this type of mutually-supportive engagement to work, both parties require a better understanding of these different ways of knowing, and the Kluane Research Summits offer excellent venues for this. They are structured to encourage cross-cultural conversations, exploratory workshops, and multiple opportunities and methodologies for exchanging teachings on both ways of knowing (including language sharing).

At the Summits, the local history of researcher-community member interactions and relationships is addressed and acknowledged, leading to productive conversations about where those relationships stand now and visions for positive, respectful paths forward into the future.

The Summits also allow for direct interaction between community members and researchers who may not otherwise have the opportunity to work directly with local residents, allowing

each group to freely exchange their interests and perspectives in a supportive environment. Furthermore, the Summits foster communication among researchers who often work in isolation on specific environmental questions, but who may not otherwise have the opportunity to interact directly, resulting in increased opportunities for collaboration and for increasingly holistic research.

## **Conclusion**

The Kluane Research Summits offer an important step towards reconciliation in research. They are one way in which researchers and both First Nation and non-First Nation community members can mend and build relationships, learn about each other's ways of knowing, and share information about cultures and landscapes. The Summits allows community members to communicate directly to researchers what is important for them, both in terms of research interests as well as about how research is conducted, and reciprocally it allows researchers to discuss their interests with the community. This allows for more meaningful and collaborative research, but also sets a solid foundation for new relationships, while reinforcing existing ones. Building research capacity in communities relies on dialogue and mutual listening, as well as an understanding from researchers with regards to the capacity, needs and interests of communities. To build long term relationships between researchers and communities, both these parties as well as decision-makers and the broader community require the conscientious creation of shared time and space for respectful, mutually-supportive dialogue which needs to be supported at all levels and through dedicated resources.

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