

Tips on How to Work with First Nations

Professionals working in the field of applied biology, as well as operating in other areas of practice, are being presented with an ever-increasing number of opportunities to work in collaboration with or on behalf of First Nation communities. Such partnerships can culminate in meaningful, mutually beneficial opportunities that often result in more informed resource management decisions by integrating traditional knowledge with Western science.

It is critical that registered professionals are culturally competent to ensure they interact with First Nations in a manner that is respectful and also effective. British Columbia has wonderfully diverse indigenous cultures, with 203 First Nation communities and thirty-four different indigenous languages. Be proactive and use whatever resources are available to familiarize yourself with a First Nations' culture and customs.

Each First Nation is unique: avoid generalizations. Reach out to other professionals who have long-standing relationships with the First Nation to further your understanding of potential sensitivities and improve your understanding of traditions, requirements, and environmental concerns.

Be transparent: when communicating, avoid technical jargon and speak in plain language to facilitate understanding.

'Fess up: if you make a mistake, speak up and be honest. If you do not know the answer to a question, say so and seek answers to questions raised by First Nations in a timely manner.

Ask questions and accept the fact that you will be ignorant of aspects of a particular First Nations' culture. This will strengthen your understanding of the First Nation and demonstrate respect by showing an interest to learn more about their culture.

Show your sense of humour and approach these relationships with humility.

Don't push: let First Nations share traditional information if they so choose, and at their own pace and level of comfort. Be patient. Traditional knowledge is knowledge embedded in the cultural traditions of regional, indigenous or local communities that has been passed down orally over several successive generations.

Absorb: take it upon yourself to learn as much as you can from these insightful knowledge holders as they carry a wealth of information that can only improve upon the work you do as a registered professional.

As biology professionals, we “uphold the principles of stewardship of aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems and biological resources”, a mandate that fits very well with traditional cultures and customs. We can work most effectively with First Nations by identifying common goals, respecting the use of traditional knowledge, and looking for opportunities to complement our scientific methods and principles with their deeply rooted knowledge. 

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