

## Native Culture and Recreation: A Preliminary Inquiry

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*This study presents preliminary research on the recreation pursuits of Native individuals from a selected reserve in Canada, and the relationship of recreation preferences and participation with cultural maintenance. Ten members of an Algonquin Native community near the Ontario-Quebec border were interviewed in depth. While not necessarily representative of the community as a whole, the ten included a variety of ages and stages of life and a mix of males and females. The results of this study reveal that recreation tends to be valued for its social potential and as compensation from work. Further results reveal that respondents tended to agree that Native recreation (dance, songs, games, special events) contributes to their maintenance of Native culture, whereas participation in non-Native recreation activities may facilitate their integration into mainstream society. It was concluded that this preliminary study be expanded into further research with a larger sample size while utilizing a population group consisting of randomly selected members of the reserve. Also, it is possible that this preliminary research could be expanded into a nation-wide study.*

*Cette étude présente la recherche préliminaire sur les activités récréatives des Autochtones d'une réserve choisie au Canada, et, sur la relation entre les préférences récréatives et la participation au maintien de la culture. Dix membres de la communauté algonquienne, près de la frontière Ontario-Québec, ont participé à une interview en profondeur. Bien qu'ils n'étaient pas nécessairement représentatifs de la communauté entière, les dix représentaient une variété d'âges, d'étapes de la vie et un mélange d'hommes et de femmes. Les résultats de l'étude révèlent qu'il y a une tendance de valoriser la récréation comme compensation pour le travail ainsi que pour son potentiel social. D'autres résultats révèlent la tendance des personnes interrogées à consentir à l'idée que la récréation autochtone (danse, chansons, jeux, événements spéciaux) contribuait au maintien de leur culture autochtone tandis que la participation aux activités récréatives non-autochtones pouvait faciliter leur intégration à la société majoritaire. Ce fut conclu que cette étude préliminaire soit élargie afin de faire des recherches avec un échantillon de plus grande envergure tout en utilisant un groupe de personnes dans lequel les membres seraient choisis au hasard et viendraient de la réserve. Aussi est-il possible que cette recherche préliminaire puisse devenir une étude à l'échelle nationale.*

## Introduction

Recent research concerned with the relationship between recreation and the pluralistic nature of the Canadian population has tended to overlook Natives. Studies such as Hall and Rhyme (1988), Hall (1988) and Searle and Brayley (1993) mention Native recreation and leisure in passing, yet this scant attention does not adequately address Native peoples because they are examined as if they were a homogeneous whole, or as if they were no different from ethnic minorities. That is to say, the unique position of Natives in Canadian society is not adequately addressed and the cultural diversity within the Native community is not recognized in much recreation research. Other recent studies focusing on leisure and cultural diversity have not examined Native recreation at all. Studies such as Karlis and Kartakoullis (1992) and Bolla and Dawson (1989), while concerned with recreation and minority cultures, have not included any reference to Native peoples.

Overall, the research that has been conducted into Native recreation behaviours and leisure patterns tends to be either historical in nature, or focused on presenting an account of Native recreation behaviours (see Malloy, 1991; Ibrahim, 1991; Axelson, 1985; Winther, 1989). Consequently, there is no adequate account of contemporary Native cultures and the role of recreation and leisure in those cultures.

Natives living in Canada engage in a variety of recreation activities. As demonstrated in literature reviews of studies of minority groups (see Karlis and Dawson, 1990; Karlis, 1990; 1991), the socio-cultural recreation activities engaged in by a culturally distinguishable group often directly reflect the unique culture of the specific group. On the other hand, the socio-cultural recreation activities within mainstream society are often most reflective of the dominant culture (Karlis, 1990).

Research that looks at the relationship between Native people and recreation has focused primarily on describing the type of activities in which they engage (Van der Wal, 1988; Winther, 1989; Hinch and Delamere, 1993; Cole, 1993). Limited focus has also been placed on understanding the meaning and functioning of recreation for Canada's Native population (Reid, 1993). More emphasis needs to be given to examining the relationship between the diverse nature of Native culture and the types of recreation activities preferred and participated in by Native individuals. That is, not enough analysis has been placed on identifying the distinct dimensions of Native culture and the impact these may have on recreation and leisure participation. Moreover, little focus has been placed on examining the potential of recreation and leisure for enhancing cultural awareness and assisting cultural preservation amongst Native peoples.

To respond effectively to the recreation needs of Natives living in Canada,



greater understanding is needed concerning the distinguishable, unique elements of Native culture, recreation participation and leisure orientations. There exists little practical understanding of the diversity of Native cultures, and the implications this diversity may have on the provision of recreation services. Consequently, the very real potential exists for the needs of Native people to be overlooked when it comes to the provision of recreation services, particularly with respect to the desire to engage in socio-cultural recreation activities that are representative of respective Native cultures (see, for example, Saskatchewan Senior Citizens' Provincial Council, 1988).

In the present era, with an expanded consciousness with regards to cultural diversity and pluralism, there is a need for more information about the relationship between Native culture and recreation. Traditionally, recreation activities have been dismissed as being easily defined and of secondary importance to Native peoples (Beaudry, 1988). A study by Malloy, Nilson and Yoshioka (1993), focusing on a recognition of diverse needs to better administer recreation services to Canada's Native people, is a starting point to address these concerns. Past studies on the relationship between culture and recreation in Canada have focused for the most part on the multi-ethnic dimension of Canadian society (see Bolla, Dawson and Karlis, 1991). Native culture and its relationship with recreation has not been the object of extensive examination. Thus, the complexity and diversity of Native cultures and their relationship to recreation and leisure remains a largely uncharted area of investigation.

Regardless of where Natives reside, all have a need to experience recreation. These recreation needs may be centred around the desire to experience socio-cultural recreational activities representative of their Native heritage, or alternatively they may be representative of mainstream culture. However, in urban settings it is often difficult to maintain cultural recreation institutions to counter the forces of acculturation and assimilation (Lurie, 1971).

The purpose of this initial case study is to examine the relationship between Native culture and recreation. More specifically, the objective of this research is to examine the relationship between Native culture and recreation for members of a selected reserve. What is the nature of the relationship that exists between preferences and participation in recreation activities and cultural maintenance? To what extent are Natives who participate in the recreation activities representative of their culture more likely to maintain Native culture?

An investigation of the role of leisure in the lives of Native people is important because it provides an avenue by which culturally appropriate initiatives can be developed to fulfil the diverse and pluralistic needs of the Native peoples. It is hoped that this preliminary research will provide information

that will be of use to Native organizations, program administrators, and policy and decision makers. It is also hoped that this preliminary research can be expanded into a more comprehensive study of the Native community in question and other Native communities across Canada as well.

## The Reserve and Its Recreation Services

The reserve under study is an Algonquin community near a town of over 3,000 people near the Ontario-Quebec border that consists of nearly 30 square kilometres. Community members speak either Algonquin, English or French. There are approximately 300 families residing in the community, comprising an on-reserve population of about 1,200. The mandate of the reserve's band council is to serve the physical, social, mental, spiritual and recreational needs of reserve members.

Recreation and the provision of recreation services is a social concern of this reserve. The recreation committee, part of the reserve's Health and Social Services Unit, serves the community in many ways, but has five basic functions: (1) paying the electricity bills of recreation sites, (2) maintaining recreation areas, (3) purchasing special recreation equipment, (4) sponsoring special sports, recreation and leisure groups, and (5) creating special leisure and recreation activities for the community.

A number of services and facilities are available on the reserve for the pursuit of recreation. These range from outdoor recreation (e.g., beaches, lakes and trails) to sports (e.g., gymnasium, outdoor rink and weight room), to social centres (e.g., school facilities and the Endong Centre).

Recreation activities offered at the reserve may be classified according to two broad types: those representative of Native culture and those representative of the culture of mainstream society. Those representative of Native culture include the annual cultural week, Indian Days and pow-wows. Those representative of mainstream society include various sports such as the volleyball tournament and events such as the bike rally.

## Methods

The method used to collect data consisted of the interviewing of members of the chosen community. In-depth interviews were conducted by a trained interviewer who is a member of the reserve. Through the membership records available at the reserve office, ten individuals were selected, seven women and three men. Four respondents interviewed lived off the reserve in the city of Ottawa and six lived on the reserve. Essentially, these individuals were initially chosen because of their availability and willingness to participate. However, all proved to be relatively articulate and informative respondents. While not



necessarily representative of the community as a whole, the ten do include a variety of ages, stages of life and a mix of males and females.

A semi-structured interview schedule with open-ended questions focusing on socio-cultural recreation preferences and participation patterns, and cultural identity was used. Socio-cultural recreation was seen to consist of social (e.g., clubs or organizations), arts (e.g., cultural dances and festivals), and sport activities (e.g., hockey, lacrosse, etc.). Questions were asked such as: When participating in recreation, do you do so with other Natives? What types of Native cultural recreation activities do you engage in? Are Native cultural recreation activities accessible to you? Questions were asked regarding the culture that each respondent identified with most (i.e., either Native culture or mainstream Canadian culture). Such questions included: How do you view yourself in relation to Native and mainstream culture? What culture do you identify with most?

By collecting data in this way, it was possible to not only highlight the recreation behaviours of these particular Native individuals but to also draw preliminary associations between Native culture maintenance and patterns of recreation participation. The data collected in this study provide information concerning the relationship between Native culture and recreation, the role culture plays with respect to recreation participation for Natives, and the cultural recreation behaviours of Natives. Thus, the nature of the relationship between Native culture and recreation is analyzed, while highlighting differences between leisure opportunities and practices.

## Results

For five respondents (three men and two women) the meaning of recreation is "social in nature." That is, it consists of activities for the community, bringing people together. For two female respondents, recreation is "activity experienced outside of work." Two other female respondents claimed that recreation is based on "pleasure or enjoyment." Another woman claimed that recreation has a personal meaning. That is, it is activity that is "needed for the body and mind."

Five respondents (one man and four women) claimed that recreation is very or extremely important to them. Four respondents (two men and two women) claimed that recreation is at least somewhat important while one female respondent indicated that recreation is really not that important. In response to personal satisfaction with recreation, five women claimed to be satisfied, whereas the other five (three men and two women) said that they were not satisfied. Those who were not satisfied, both men and women, felt that they needed access to more recreation services, or encountered a lack of needed services.

Native cultural activities that tended to be preferred and participated in more often included dancing, beading, Native teaching, arts, crafts, cooking and pow-wows. A diversity of places in which individuals become involved in Native cultural recreation activities were mentioned. These included the reserve's immersion centre, the school, the gym, the cultural centre and the Endong Centre. Similarly, a diversity of opinions were presented with respect to what organizations should be responsible for the provision of Native cultural recreation activities. Organizations mentioned included the cultural centre, the band office, the health centre and the school. One female respondent felt that a special organization needed to be established on-reserve to serve Native cultural recreation needs. It was also indicated that more Native cultural recreation activities were desired. Included in this list of desired activities were canoe making (a male) and instructional activities highlighting Native culture.

Eight respondents claimed that involvement in non-Native cultural recreation activities contributed to their integration into mainstream society. Six of these eight were women. One male respondent claimed that non-Native cultural recreation activities did not contribute to integration in mainstream society, whereas the other individual (a woman) avoided directly responding to this question. A wide variety of places were mentioned in which subjects become involved in non-Native cultural recreation activities. Areas such as the gym and the school on-reserve were mentioned, as were off-reserve arenas. Some subjects felt that it is the responsibility of municipal recreation practitioners and recreation departments to provide such services. Other responses regarding the issue of responsibility for the provision of non-Native cultural recreation activities included the band office, schools and parents. Respondents indicated that more non-Native cultural recreation activities were desired. Activities such as snowmobiling, rock climbing, team sports and art classes were mentioned as needed activities.

The non-Native recreation activities most practiced and favoured by male respondents included hockey, softball and watching sports on television. Walking was popular amongst the women. Three women respondents indicated that they did not have the accessibility they wanted to non-Native cultural recreation activities. Constraints mentioned that restricted accessibility to such services included lack of child-care, time off work and money.

Seven respondents indicated that, for them, Native cultural recreation contributed to the maintenance of their Algonquin culture. Five of these were women. The other three respondents (one male and two female) were not sure how to respond to this question because they were uncertain about the role recreation played in their lives.

Most respondents (one man and seven women) indicated that they identified



with Native culture most, feeling extremely or very close to their Native culture. Moreover, these subjects also claimed to not identify at all, or at most only in part, with non-Native culture. In general, respondents felt that participation in Native cultural recreation with other band members helped maintain a sense of community and "Indianness." One male respondent identified equally with Native and non-Native culture, while the other male respondent had difficulty responding to this question.

## Summary

This study examined the relationship between Native culture and recreation. It examined whether a relationship exists between preferences and participation in Native cultural recreation activities and cultural maintenance.

The results revealed that most respondents agreed that involvement in Native cultural recreation contributed to the maintenance of one's Native culture, whereas participation in non-Native cultural recreation activities might contribute to one's integration into mainstream society. However, since it was claimed that the reserve is the primary place for participation in Native cultural recreation activities, appropriate on-reserve services need to be offered to sustain participation. According to most respondents, the responsibility for the provision of such services falls within the administration of the reserve.

While some male respondents were somewhat ambivalent towards Native culture, all women interviewed affirmed that they identified most with Native culture, not mainstream culture. Nevertheless, some women claimed not to have the access to non-Native recreation that they would have liked. They attributed this lack of opportunity to child care difficulties, not enough free time and money constraints. In this respect, Native women shared concerns common to many women (Bolla and Dawson, 1989).

From further findings, it appears as though recreation and leisure are sometimes viewed as compensation for work. Nevertheless, for both the men and the women interviewed, recreation also appears to be valued for its social potential, providing a place for social interaction, renewing friendships and strengthening community bonds.

## Conclusions

Based on the limited findings of this preliminary study, it is difficult to conclude that any direct linear relationship exists between recreation preferences, participation and the maintenance of Native culture. However, Kracht (1994, pp. 321-22) holds that participation in Native activities like the pow-wow is increasingly secularized, and much of the traditional religious symbolism is lost to a contemporary view of such rituals as "social events" promoting a general

"sense of Indianness." In this way, modern Native recreation participation is still related to Native cultural identity.

Although respondents identified more closely with Native culture, they tended to participate in both Native and non-Native recreation activities. Nevertheless, respondents who participated in Native cultural recreation activities were also likely to strongly identify with this culture. This finding supports the research of Karlis and Dawson (1990) and Karlis (1990; 1991), indicating that the recreation activities engaged in by members of cultural groups often reflect and help shape the unique culture of their specific group.

The findings of this study point beyond those of Van der Wal (1988), Winther (1989), and Hinch and Delamere (1993) which focus primarily on describing the types of activities engaged in by Native participants. The present study examines the recreation feelings, participation patterns, constraints and needs of respondents at a selected reserve. Most respondents were found to value recreation as being important in their lives. Recreation was also valued because of the intrinsic benefits of making them feel good about themselves.

However, only half of the respondents were satisfied with the recreation in their lives. It thus appears that more leisure opportunities are needed. Since the constraints experienced are those commonly experienced by most people in society in general (i.e., time, money), it may be that more affordable activities need to be offered during periods of free time.

Beaudry (1988) claims that participation in traditional "fun" activities are important in that it symbolizes the individual's acceptance of the group's norms and its desire for cohesion. Activities such as dancing and drumming have a strong "recreation flavour" that serves to reinforce a sense of "team spirit and group cohesiveness" in participants (Beaudry, 1988, p. 283). The present study reveals that although respondents do identify with Native culture and participate in Native cultural recreation activities, they also participate to much the same degree in non-Native cultural recreation activities. It is relevant to note as well that most respondents believe that participation in non-Native recreation activities contributes to integration into mainstream society. At the same time, most respondents also claim that participation in Native cultural recreation activities contributes to the maintenance of Native culture in their lives. For this reason, there is a desire to participate more in Native cultural recreation activities offered through Native organizations.

The findings of a study of the unmet needs of Natives (Saskatchewan Senior Citizens' Provincial Council, 1988) posits that participation in recreation activities provided by Native organizations offers not merely "fun and pleasure" but also increases the likelihood of cultural maintenance. As noted by Ellis



(1990), while activities such as ancestral dances may have less significance as ritual ceremony than in the past, they remain important social gatherings that strengthen a sense of identity and underscore common bonds within particular Native communities and amongst Native peoples in general.

Since it is difficult to identify the general nature of the relationship between Native cultural recreation and Native cultural maintenance from this particular preliminary study, it is recommended that a larger study be conducted. It would be advantageous to examine more than one reserve, while also expanding the number of subjects from each. From the findings of this study it would appear that recreation is valued and more services are desired by members of the community studied. However, a detailed needs assessment should be conducted by this and other such Native communities to determine what particular recreation services are needed and wanted. All in all, more research is needed to expand on the basis laid out by this preliminary research.

It may also be necessary for the administrators of this reserve to offer more year-round, ongoing recreation activities that reflect Native culture, particularly since respondents indicated a desire to participate in more of these activities. If the objective of the reserve leadership is to preserve its culture, perhaps the provision of more Native cultural recreation activities would be valuable. From the perspective of the respondents in this study, it is believed that involvement in Native cultural recreation activities helps maintain feelings of attachment to Native culture. This not only indicates the social value of recreation, it also underlines the potential recreation has in the maintenance of Native culture. Further inquiry should be undertaken in order to come to a clearer understanding of the processes involved in Native cultural maintenance through recreation and leisure.

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