

A framework for doing things In a Good Way: insights on Mshiikenh (freshwater turtle) conservation through weaving Western Science and Indigenous Knowledge in Whitefish River First Nation

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Abstract

Co-developed conservation programs for Species At-Risk, created in partnership between Indigenous Nations and non-Indigenous researchers, represent a vital shift toward effective species recovery strategies that are culturally respectful, and contribute to reconciliation within the natural sciences. By weaving together diverse knowledge systems and prioritizing Indigenous laws, knowledge values, and community priorities, these collaborations aim to restore species at-risk populations and prevent species extirpation—a task of increasing urgency amid the global biodiversity decline. As similar partnerships gain momentum across Canada, it is critical to reflect on approaches that honor Indigenous perspectives and actively avoid the historical harms associated with colonial research practices on Indigenous lands. This paper presents six key themes for meaningful collaboration, informed by experiences from Whitefish River First Nation, or Wiigwaaskingaa (Elder Arthur McGregor baa, 2000) in Northern Mnidoo Gami (Georgian Bay), Ontario, Canada, where community members and researchers co-developed a mshiikenh (freshwater turtle) conservation initiative. We focus on the importance of co-developing project objectives, honouring community priorities, respecting data sovereignty, the journey of learning and unlearning, focusing on a community-guided trajectory, and promoting tangible outcomes. By highlighting specific examples from Whitefish River First Nation's mshiikenh conservation project, we demonstrate the value of community-engaged research as a pathway forward for Species At-Risk conservation in Canada and beyond.

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