

What People Say May Not Be What They Know

April 30 2007

What a person says is not necessarily an indication of what that person knows because speech is motivated by social circumstances and the desire to influence the listener. Two researchers at the University of Missouri-Columbia have applied this principle to local environmental knowledge by indigenous peoples and are urging other scientists to incorporate more observation and skepticism into their studies.

"We need to treat talk for what it is," said Craig Palmer, assistant professor of anthropology in MU's College of Arts and Science. "Talk influences people. It's used as a social and political tool, and it may or may not reflect actual knowledge. People's answers to questions may have more to do with social relationships than with their knowledge."

Palmer and Reed Wadley, also an MU assistant professor of anthropology, wrote a paper on this subject that has been published electronically and will appear in October in the journal *Human Ecology*. The paper argued that because scientists often study local environmental knowledge by asking questions, it is important to recognize that answers to such questions may not reflect true knowledge. Revealing true local environmental knowledge is important because it gives people in other parts of the world another possible way to deal with environmental change, Wadley said.

"One of the keys to responding well to environmental change of whatever kind is having a diverse toolkit from which to draw. Local environmental knowledge represents such toolkits that people have

developed over the generations, based on local responses to environmental change," Wadley said.

The concept that talk may be different from knowledge has been largely overlooked in studies of local environmental knowledge, Palmer said. To illustrate the importance of this concept, the researchers used as an example the residents of small fishing villages on the Great Northern Peninsula (GNP) of Newfoundland. According to Palmer, these people are traditionally reluctant to talk about their knowledge or to disagree with what others say about the environment. It also is popular to tell "cuffers," exaggerations that are used to make talk more interesting.

The fishing industry has historically been a major source of income in the GNP, but a decline in cod stock in recent decades has caused economic problems and resulted in social stratification and blame in the communities. As a result, nearly all conversation about the environment is highly politicized, Palmer said. Local residents are acutely aware of this and attempt to influence the listener when they talk about the environment. Regular accusations for the reduction of the cod stock against one group or another have resulted in what Palmer called "an almost ritualized reference to the possibility that talk would not be equivalent to knowledge."

Palmer and Wadley recommend that scientists recognize and make use of this skepticism, as well as observation of non-verbal behavior, rather than relying solely on verbal answers to questions. Palmer said they do not encourage researchers to ignore what local residents say, but to take into consideration the entire knowledge of local peoples, both social and environmental, and how that knowledge can affect talk about the environment.

"To filter out the social talk about ecological things from the knowledge that might be ecologically useful, we need to go beyond the talk and

study non-verbal behavior and how it matches with local environmental talk: what do people talk about that they actually use in dealing with the local environment? That sort of study is a good deal harder than asking folks questions and recording what they say they know," Wadley said.

Source: University of Missouri-Columbia

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