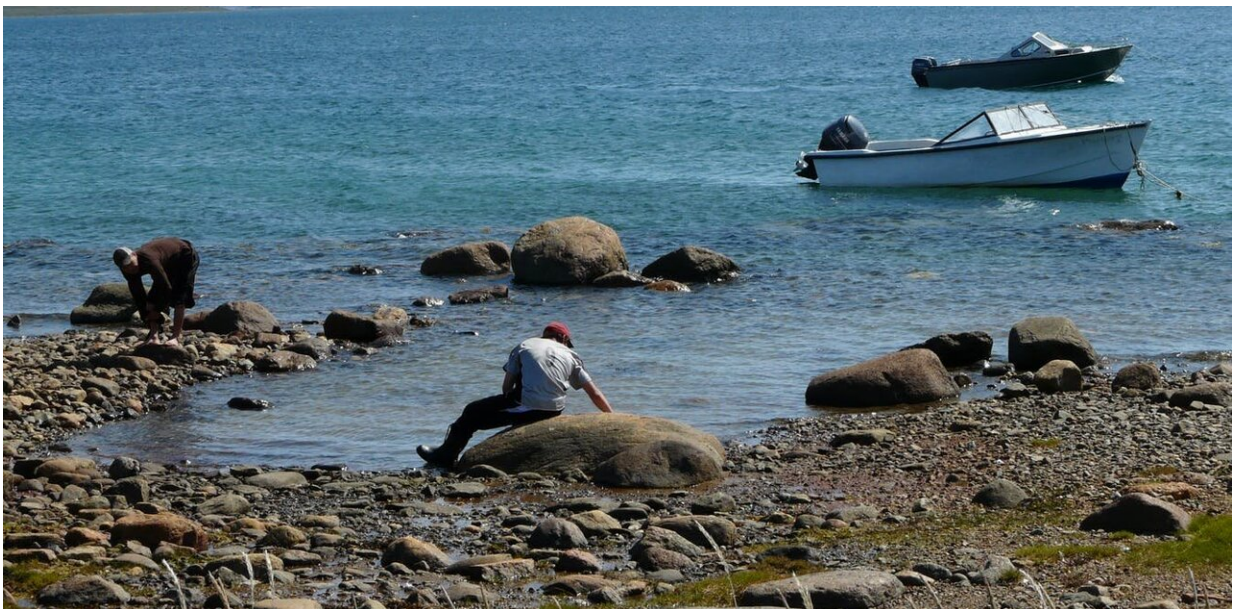


'Return to normal' travel and research may bring hazards to northern, Indigenous communities

July 9 2021, by Christina Goldhar, Arielle Frenette, Crystal Gail Fraser and Julia Christensen



Nain, Nunatsiavut. Credit: Christina Goldhar, Author provided

Throughout the pandemic, many have longed for a "return to normal." When the threat of COVID-19 subsides, we look forward to resuming our research and travel schedules, and reclaiming the elements of our lives that were disrupted over a year ago. However, for southern-based researchers and travelers, returning to northern, Indigenous communities

either for leisure or research fieldwork in summer 2021 is premature.

We are a group of scholars—Indigenous and settler northerners and southern-based researchers—who share a commitment to the development of respectful, [non-extractive research relationships](#). We question the harm that some researchers bring with them when they enter northern communities from their southern homes.

The pandemic has underscored many of the systemic injustices experienced by Indigenous peoples and within northern and Indigenous geographies in what is now known as Canada. These include the persistent [underfunding of health care](#), housing, the [education system](#), other [critical infrastructure such as water and sewage systems and broadband internet](#), as well as [the effects of climate change](#).

All of these place the affected communities at increased risk of the spread and harmful effects of COVID-19.

Trauma and living memory

The legacies of Indian Residential Schools continue in the living memories of survivors (direct and intergenerational) and through trauma that [has yet to be met with substantive supports](#) to address the many issues resulting from these genocidal, colonial programs that targeted Indigenous peoples.

The recent recoveries of the remains of Indigenous people at the sites of former Indian Residential Schools has retraumatized entire communities. Clearly, the grief and harm caused by these policies cannot be contained by the bounds of "history."



Kuujuuaq, Nunavik. Credit: Arielle Frenette

The coronavirus pandemic reframes our understanding of the potential [harm that research can bring to northern communities](#). It forces us to place the well-being and needs of northern communities ahead of the needs of our research. The pandemic presents us with an opportunity to pause and reflect on these relationships, and to consider how we will maintain these practices of care as we move into a post-pandemic world.

The restrictions of the pandemic have encouraged us to be less wasteful with the knowledge that has already been produced and documented. For

example, we have turned to data and other research materials that have not been fully explored due to the drive to always be in search of new questions, new projects and original outcomes.

It has also encouraged us to consider how research capacity within the North can be strengthened and supported by southern researchers, and new partnerships can be fostered, instead of southern researchers traveling North to collect data.

Current research practices are embedded in academic expectations and funding systems. They impose increasing pressure on communities to engage in, and collaborate with research on their territories, and northern Indigenous communities have been collaborating with research for decades.

There is an incredible amount of labor that community members must perform to facilitate even the most hands-off research, while projects often offer little benefit to the community.

As research projects are designed to center academic priorities, they often fail to meaningfully address community research needs. This results in [colonial, extractive research relationships](#), where researchers arrive from outside of a community, extract knowledge, data, labor and expertise for their benefit, and leave.



Makenzie River, N.W.T. Credit: Indigenous Consulting Services Inc.

Practices of care

The pandemic has also offered a moment to consider and respond to the changing landscape of Indigenous research ethics in this country.

Indigenous northerners have long drawn attention to the [coloniality of research](#) occurring on their homelands and the need to move towards greater degrees of autonomy [in Indigenous research](#). Responding to these needs requires considering the harm caused by even the most common

["best-practice" research approaches](#). It requires reconsidering the governance and funding structures that shape northern research.

Approaching research as a conscientious practice of care involves questioning the intent, as well as the various negative effects brought forward by a research agenda. This must be done in a way that reaches beyond ethical considerations or "good intentions." As we know from Canada's long history of colonialism, even "good intentions" can be harmful.

Caring means a context-based, selfless and affectionate reflection that takes into account all individuals, communities and environments affected by one's actions. Community health and well-being must take precedence over research careers and the agendas of funding agencies. Every researcher who chooses not to travel to the North this summer, reduces the risk of bringing COVID-19 and its variants into the community.

In other words, practices of care are not about research, but about all living things involved in the research process and choices of methodology. We argue that, before choosing fieldwork in this early post-pandemic present, researchers must adopt a caring attitude. This means not returning to the northern research status quo, but instead centring community health and well-being, [including the climate](#), in the design and implementation of future research projects.

During the pandemic, the Canadian government has provided funding for Indigenous communities—such as through the [Indigenous Community Support Fund](#)—to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. While these short-term funding programs are certainly welcome, there is a need for sustained commitments to address the [critical gap in social and economic infrastructure](#).

Advocating for the continued funding of COVID-19-related programming, and a meaningful address of long-standing social and economic infrastructure deficits in northern and Indigenous communities would be a welcome alternative to fieldwork this summer. Ultimately, for southern-based researchers, there is a continued need to maintain distance as a practice of care for the well-being of northerners.

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