

Indigenous data sovereignty can help save British Columbia's wild salmon

June 24 2024, by Sara Cannon, Alexander Tahkwakin Duncan and Nigel Sainsbury



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Non-Indigenous scientists [increasingly realize](#) that Indigenous data [are key](#) to solving today's environmental challenges.

Indigenous Peoples have [generated and cared for data](#) for millennia, passing down knowledge through traditions like storytelling, art and language. This knowledge [is crucial](#) to Indigenous ways of life, including the sustainable stewardship of ecosystems.

With partnerships between non-Indigenous scientists and Indigenous knowledge holders [proliferating](#), incorporating [Indigenous data sovereignty \(IDS\)](#)—the right of Indigenous Peoples to govern the collection, ownership and application of their data—is vital for successful collaborations and conservation.

Science and Indigenous data

Non-Indigenous scientists have a [troubling track record](#) of unethical research practices.

Examples of treating Indigenous knowledge holders as [research subjects](#) are common and often lead to exploitation, mistrust and ongoing power imbalances that [persist today](#). For instance, [Indigenous data](#)—which includes information about an Indigenous Nation and its land, resources, [demographic data](#), [education levels](#), sacred land maps, songs, social media, and beyond—may be used without proper acknowledgement constituting the [theft and exploitation](#) of Indigenous knowledge and resources.

Transparent collaborations between external researchers and Indigenous Peoples are a positive development. However, collaborations [can also place pressures](#) on Indigenous knowledge holders and communities. These pressures can compound stresses upon communities who are at the same time also dealing with the legacies of violent colonial dispossession and [navigating environmental harms and injustices largely not of their own making](#).

[Indigenous rights](#) to data sovereignty are recognized by the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples \(UNDRIP\)](#). UNDRIP is further affirmed as federal law through Canada's [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act](#) and encoded as provincial law in B.C. through the [Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act](#).

Growing recognition that Indigenous data can inform environmental stewardship has only added to pressures on Indigenous knowledge holders and communities to publicize their data. Meanwhile, the [open data](#) and [big data](#) movements—which aim to make data widely accessible and combine data from various sources to address societal issues—is simultaneously pressuring Nations to [release control](#).

While [open data](#) offers benefits like accountability and broader analyses, it also puts Indigenous Peoples' control over their data at risk.

Exclusion of Indigenous data from data-sets marginalizes Indigenous communities, while inclusion without proper guidance [perpetuates biases](#) and removes data from their cultural contexts. Initiatives like the [First Nations Principles of OCAP](#) and the [CARE Principles](#) integrate Indigenous perspectives into data governance and offer a path toward aligning open data practices with Indigenous sovereignty.

IDS in British Columbia

Efforts to protect wild Pacific salmon populations in B.C. demonstrate the importance of IDS for conservation.

Pacific salmon are [essential for healthy ecosystems](#) and hold [deep cultural significance](#) for Indigenous Peoples across Western Canada. Threats to salmon, spanning freshwater and marine habitats, are [complex and diverse](#).

For millennia before colonization, many First Nations in B.C. utilized data to [manage salmon fisheries](#) sustainably. Today, the [reliance on industry data by government regulators](#) like Fisheries and Oceans Canada poses risks to salmon populations and undermines Indigenous stewardship.

In June 2022, we were a part of an [online webinar](#) hosted by the Watershed Futures Initiative at Simon Fraser University that brought together First Nations knowledge holders and technical staff to discuss these challenges in the context of wild Pacific salmon in B.C.

The findings of this event were recently [published in *Facets*](#) and include potential steps for First Nations governments to take in asserting sovereignty over their data. Additionally, there are also recommendations that external researchers can follow to ensure they respect IDS and maintain ethical data management.

For example, First Nations may want to create steps or policies for external researchers or neighboring Nations to follow when requesting access to their data or territories. Nations may also want to create tools supporting data collection, management and dissemination, or consider using outside tools to help manage data.

Meanwhile, non-Indigenous researchers must educate themselves about IDS, engage with First Nations before planning research or monitoring, and avoid making assumptions about ownership and data management. They can also find ways to direct funding and resources to Nations and advocate for changing policies within and beyond their organizations or institutions.

To support these efforts, we created an [Indigenous Data Sovereignty toolkit](#) with links for further reading, third-party tools for data management, template data agreements and more.

Moving forward

Indigenous Peoples are global leaders in environmental justice and conservation, yet discussions about collaborative research often overlooks the importance of IDS. Meanwhile, the push for open data policies may disregard Indigenous rights and undermine efforts to protect Indigenous data.

We call for greater consideration of IDS in research, conservation and governance arrangements. Scientists must integrate IDS into research partnerships to support Indigenous sovereignty and facilitate more successful conservation outcomes. At the same time, Crown decision-makers must establish governance agreements with Nations that respect and value Indigenous data sovereignty.

IDS is imperative for equitable and sustainable conservation efforts, paving the way for a future where ecosystems flourish, wildlife thrives and communities prosper.

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