

Study: What makes for effective partnerships with Indigenous nations on the environment?

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Protecting the environment often draws on a collaboration between community members, non-government organizations, academia, and, local, state and federal agencies. Indigenous nations however, are often invited to participate in an initiative after it has already begun to take shape. Indigenous partners are most likely to remain engaged in multi-actor collaborations when they are viewed as equal partners, when non-Indigenous actors have taken the time to understand their relationship to the environment and how they view the world, according to a Dartmouth-led study recently published in *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*.

"Natural resource and environmental partnerships between Indigenous nations, NGO's and settler governments are rarer than most people realize. We were very interested in understanding the factors that hold these partnerships together when they do form," says [Nicholas J. Reo](#), an assistant professor of environmental studies and Native American studies at Dartmouth, who served as the first author of the study.

Researchers studied 39 multi-actor environmental partnerships in the Great Lakes region, by interviewing 34 members of Indigenous nations from Anishnabek, Menominee, Cree and Haudenosaunee cultural groups. The success or failure of such voluntary partnerships appeared to be contingent on six themes critical to understanding how Indigenous collaborators' view the world:

- respect for intergenerational knowledge and practices, such as by integrating a prayer or other cultural protocol at the start of a meeting that may in turn invite one's ancestors to the meeting and help guide

the session;

- control of knowledge, whereby, Indigenous partners have an opportunity to take ownership and collect or monitor data;
- intergenerational involvement through Indigenous youths can be inspired to be stewards of the environment from their elders;
- self-determination, whereby, partners establish a shared understanding of what this means;
- continuous cross-cultural education on the cultural traditions, histories and priorities, including the relationships to the land, water, plants and animals; and
- early involvement, whereby, Indigenous partners are invited to participate when an initiative may still be in the conceptual stage.

The unique cultural and spiritual relationships that Indigenous communities have to the land and water is integral to understanding who they are. For example, rivers are not thought of as natural "resources" but as living ancestors for Indigenous communities, such as for Anishnaabe and M?ori people. Dartmouth researchers and their cohorts looked at the role that Indigenous knowledge has had in river restoration efforts and outcomes for three Indigenous nations in the U.S., New Zealand and Canada in a comparative study published in [Sustainability Science](#). Researchers collaborated with representatives from:

- the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians in northwest Michigan to investigate the removal of dams pertaining to the Ottaway River project;
- the Waikato-Tainunui on the north island of New Zealand to study the reclaiming of rights to the Waikato River, which helps

define their political and social structure but has been impacted by urbanization and agriculture; and with

- the Walpole Island First Nation in southwestern Ontario, Canada, to study efforts to restore and reclaim the St. Clair River given the pollution that has resulted from a large petrochemical complex nearby.

Obtaining a cross-cultural context on the spiritual significance of water can provide Indigenous and non-Indigenous [community members](#) with a shared context for the issues at hand. For river restoration, the concept of restoration for many Indigenous communities is not just ecological but is one that also has political, social and cultural meaning.

More information: Nicholas J Reo et al. Factors that support Indigenous involvement in multi-actor environmental stewardship, *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* (2017). [DOI: 10.1177/1177180117701028](https://doi.org/10.1177/1177180117701028)

Coleen A. Fox et al. "The river is us; the river is in our veins": re-defining river restoration in three Indigenous communities, *Sustainability Science* (2017). [DOI: 10.1007/s11625-016-0421-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-016-0421-1)

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