



Voices from the Field

Welcome to *Voices from the Field*, a podcast series produced by the National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health. The NCCIH focuses on innovative research and community-based initiatives promoting the health and well-being of First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples in Canada.

Podcast: Voices from the Field 18 - A Shared Future – Researching energy autonomy in the context of climate change for Indigenous Communities in Canada

This episode features “A Shared Future” a five year program of research which stands for “Achieving strength, health and autonomy through renewable energy development for the future.” Dr. Diana Lewis - a Mi'kmaq scholar from Sipekne'katik First Nation - shares how this research program includes a number of Indigenous communities from across Canada who are working on renewable energy projects to promote their energy autonomy. By seeking out alternatives to extractive industries, A Shared Future program has the opportunity to influence climate change discussions, policies, and ultimately solutions.

Bio

Dr. Diana (Dee) Lewis is an Assistant Professor appointed to the Department of Geography, Environment & Geomatics at the University of Guelph. She is a member of the Sipekne'katik First Nation in Nova Scotia. Diana is Co-Director of *A Shared Future: Achieving Strength, Health, and Autonomy through Renewable Energy Development for the Future*, an international research program which explores how Indigenous knowledge systems, as applied to renewable energy development, may have the potential to lead us towards 'healthful environments' through reconciling and healing our relations with each other as well as with the land, air, and water around us. Diana's long-term research interests are to foster a wider understanding of the unique aspects of Indigenous environmental health, specifically as it is impacted by resource or industrial development. Her research focuses on developing an Indigenous based environmental health risk assessment framework.



Transcript

Diana Lewis - Kwe, n'in teluisi Diana Lewis. Teleyawi Sipekne'katik. My name is Diana Lewis. I'm Mi'kmaq from Sipekne'katik First Nation in Mi'kma'ki, which is the Atlantic provinces. I am an Assistant Professor at the University of Guelph. I just started there on January 1st in the Department of Geography, Environment, and Geomatics.

Roberta Stout - Can you tell me about the “A Shared Future” program and how it came about?

Diana Lewis – “A Shared Future” came about from a previous project that Heather Castleden and I had worked on. Heather Castleden is at the University of Victoria and together, her and I are co-directors of “A Shared Future.” We had worked together on a water governance project and the group that worked together had such a great working relationship – it was Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, community members, organizational members – it had such a great working relationship throughout that project that they were looking for something to work together on after that project ended.

So “A Shared Future” stands for “Achieving strength, health, and autonomy through renewable energy development for the future.” The team of people, [the] team of academics that work together, we look at projects, we're looking at both environmental impacts and health. We were looking at a project where we could come from a strengths-based perspective to highlight what communities were doing across the country. Renewable energy was very much on the forefront at that time and we wanted to see what various community leaderships and their governments were doing in terms of asserting autonomy in renewable energy and was it actually being reflected in the projects that they were engaging in. So, we reached out to a number of communities across the country that were doing really exciting things and were involved in partnerships that had a lot of potential for self-determination and energy security. It just was a really good lens to look at moving together in reconciliation to a healthy future.

Roberta Stout - When you talk about renewable energy, what do you mean by that? What are some of the projects related to that?

Diana Lewis - So we have a number of different projects across the country. One of the projects that we focus on [is one] that I am co-lead on with Tobique First Nation in New Brunswick. In that project, Tobique First Nation is in a partnership on a 20 megawatt wind farm in Sussex, New Brunswick that just this past year has started to generate close to a million dollars a year in revenue for the community, but they've not stopped there. What they envisioned for themselves is to get into biomass and solar. They have hydro development adjacent to their community that New Brunswick power installed in the 1950s without their consent and flooded their territory. So they've lost territory to a hydro project. The community asserted their self-determination and stopped paying their hydro bills to force New Brunswick Power to the table, and they're now in the process of negotiating five megawatts for the community from that project. So they're very, very, progressive in terms of the energy projects that they're pursuing. One of the other projects that we have in “A Shared Future” is with Sooke First Nation. That one is called From the Ocean Floor to the Mountain Top. I'm not sure how much you know about Sooke First Nation, but they are a leader in renewable energy in British Columbia, and here they had this really wonderful project where they had installed solar panels on a greenhouse and were growing wasabi of all things! Like wasabi, some people don't even really know what wasabi is, and they had a trade partnership with, I think it's Japan where they supply the wasabi that's needed for restaurants in that country. Through that partnership then, we're envisioning the next steps that they were going to take this. They were envisioning installing solar panels on all of the houses throughout Sooke First Nation.

There are communities in Canada that are engaging in these really exciting initiatives and trade relationships. All of the other things that come from those kinds of opportunities is something we wanted to really highlight in this partnership, and Sooke First Nation was really generous in joining us in “A Shared Future” and hosting our first gathering.

“Women in Renewable Energy” is another project. When we first started, there were very few women involved so we wanted to highlight that that's an inequity in this sector - that we're not looking at Indigenous women getting involved very meaningfully in this industry. So when “A Shared Future” started, we were able to partner then with these communities and do some research that they needed done in terms of how policies were working in their benefit or weren't working in their benefit and to do analysis of government policy. Government uses the word ‘reconciliation,’ and if you are to critique a policy and its rollout, is it really reconciliation or is it business as usual?

Roberta Stout - How do we know when it's reconciliation?

Diana Lewis - Well, I would say reconciliation truly is recognizing that Indigenous people can self-determine their future. It's not coming to the table with a predetermined agenda or restricted agenda, but truly engaging and reflecting autonomy of communities to make their own decisions. When you do a critical

analysis of policy, you can see that that's not necessarily the case, that reconciliation has really become a buzzword.

Roberta Stout - You were talking about energy autonomy. I'm curious to know, why is it important to have energy autonomy?

Diana Lewis - My interest in this area started back when I had finished my Master's Degree. I was asked by the Atlantic Policy Congress of First Nation Chiefs in the Atlantic Region to look at how involved Atlantic First Nations were in renewable energy and what was the renewable energy potential of the communities in the Atlantic region? One of the biggest issues in our communities at that time, and it was around 2013 when I did this project, was that the administrations were paying a lot of money on energy costs because for those people who are on social assistance, the band administration pays for the utilities in their homes.

In the Atlantic region, we have really high percentage of people on social assistance. One of the things that I did is I did a projection based on today's date, if we are the fastest growing population, and if we continue to project that growth going forward. So think of it, this is pre- Trudeau time, so this is still in a Conservative government where we had 2% cap on annual funding increases. We were going to be in a crisis really quickly because the budgets couldn't keep up with the energy costs. So the leadership needed to do something about it. When we look at the crisis of not doing anything about it versus looking at energy options or conservation initiatives, it was something that wasn't on the radar of leadership at that time. When I could project those figures in front of leadership, it really caught their attention. So to me, when we think about autonomy, energy security, self-determination, it's having the facts in front of you to make decisions and then to decide what is the best way to go about those needs, not having government do a top down solution for the community.

Roberta Stout - Based on the work and the projects thus far, can you share some of the stories that highlight the strengths and leadership within the communities that are moving more towards energy, autonomy, or clean and renewable energy? What is leadership's role in that at the community level and what are some of the strengths that you've seen so far in the work that you're doing?

Diana Lewis - So I've already talked about Sooke First Nation and the project that they're doing with the green houses and with wasabi and the work that Tobique First Nation is doing. The activities that we're getting into coming into the next year with Tobique First Nation is starting to engage more deeply with the community. They've already done their community energy plan. They have a vision for what they want to achieve and how they want to become a net zero community. This is exciting to know that this is happening in our First Nation communities. You know, we don't get a lot of publicity about [these] kind[s] of really groundbreaking initiatives going on in our communities, but here's all this work already happening. The way that we work with our communities is a community-based partnership approach, so they determine for us what their research priorities are. In the next year with Tobique First Nation, we now are going to measure health outcomes, and is energy a determinant of health? One of the things that I said about the project that I did early on in my career - about putting data in front of leadership - what we've found working with communities on health is they don't have health baseline data - to get this baseline so that they can measure going forward. If we get the data today on health status and the community becomes more engaged with energy in five years, does that make a difference?

And if so, how much of a difference? And so we'll publish a lot about the outcomes and about the methodology and hope that other communities replicate the projects that we're working with through a shared future.

Roberta Stout - How will A Shared Future influence climate action or climate solutions?

Diana Lewis - The communities we work with are focused on renewable energy as an opportunity, first of all, to meet the energy needs of their community. Then through their energy portfolio, they also come to realize that conservation is a big part of that equation. So, how do you conserve energy in the community with the intention that getting into renewable energy partnerships as an energy revenue source will benefit the community? If you do it through solar or you do it through small hydro, if you do it through biomass or wind, these are alternatives to very extractive industries that are so detrimental to the climate that contribute to the high emissions in this country. When I think about why A Shared Future is important, [it's] in terms of influencing the climate change discussions or maybe highlighting solutions to climate change.

We are the only project in Canada that is a team of researchers and community partners who are highlighting these really exciting projects that are happening and partnerships where the communities are having a lot of success. And we are able to take our analysis to industry and to government when we publish in academic journals or in maybe more publicly accessible venues, like *The Conversation*, industry notices, government notices, and we can influence perhaps the policy discussions around climate change solutions. And we also have an international forum that are advisors in other settler colonial states that bring solutions to us, or what we're doing in Canada brings solutions to them. So, it has national relevance and international relevance, which is really exciting as well.

Roberta Stout – I think that the project that you're doing is amazing work. I find it fascinating and relevant, particularly right now, as we're trying to take more specific actions around climate change. So thank you so much.

Diana Lewis - You're welcome.

Roberta Stout - To hear more podcasts in this series, head to the Voices from the Field, on the National Collaborating Center for Indigenous Health's website, NCCIH.ca. Music on this podcast is by Blue Dot Sessions. It appears under a creative commons license. To learn more, go to www.sessions.blue.