

THE LAY OF THE LAND

FIRST NATION LAND USE RESEARCH AIMS TO CHANGE THE WAY WE LOOK AT A MAP OF MANITOBA

By Joel Schlesinger

Someday soon, Anita Olsen Harper believes we will look at a map of Manitoba a whole lot differently. The map won't simply delineate the province's borders, its lakes, rivers and roads. In fact, it will show much more than geographical features or the location of municipalities.

One day, she hopes, the map will also reflect the rich traditional and current cultural and economic land use of First Nations – where they once hunted and fished and where they still carry on those traditions today. Even their sacred sites would be mapped.

And Harper, a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Manitoba's Natural Resources Institute, is working to make that happen. She is part of a 10-person research group from the university that is working to develop a land use map for a large area of Manitoba that often appears to be nothing more than a vast stretch of wilderness.

The project, entitled *Land Use Mapping and Planning for Sustainable Development with Island Lake First Nations and other*

East-side Communities in Manitoba, aims to document the use of Indigenous traditional lands – both on reserves and crown land – in a bid to ensure government and industry engage more equitably with First Nations.

"This has to do with recording the history of the people, which is different from recording the history of non-Aboriginal people because our history has an oral tradition," says Olsen Harper, who hails from Lac Seul First Nation, a few hundred kilometres south of the area of focus for the research.

"But oral history doesn't make it any less valid than what you would read in a Canadian history book," says Olsen Harper, who is the widow of Elijah Harper, a First Nations leader best known for his pivotal role in blocking the

Meech Lake Accord in 1990.

"We're trying to look at our native land, especially in the north, where the only people in these areas are First Nations communities, to help them benefit more from the developable resources," says Shirley Thompson, principal investigator of the project and associate professor at the university's Natural Resources Institute.

"This project is about showing an alternative way of land development to serve First Nations' interests first, and those interests are very much based on medicines, spirituality and traditions."

Funded in part by Mitacs – a non-profit national organization providing research opportunities for post-secondary students – the study has partnered with the First

Shirley Thompson hopes the mapping project will raise awareness.



Mapping project team members, from left: Malay Das, Ryan Klatt, Ahmed Oyegunle, Shirley Thompson, Michelle Shepard, Pepper Pritty, Tosan Okorosobo.

Nations communities of Hollow Water, St. Theresa Point, Garden Hill and Red Sucker Lake.

Olsen Harper says the project involves, in large part, safeguarding the history of the people who have lived there for thousands of years, as well as their current activities.

"Part of the purpose of this mapping and recording history is to protect our traditional territories," she says.

And their traditional territories, which are intrinsic to the well-being of their culture, are under threat from current land use by other stakeholders like government and industry.

While economic development has occurred in these areas, the communities rarely receive tangible benefit.

"We've been so subjected to outside corporations coming in to do their mining and forestry," Olsen Harper says, adding it often negatively impacts their traditional use of the land. "Our experience as First Nations is that we have not been involved in these economic activities, nor have we been consulted."

The land use project aims to change this relationship by raising awareness among the general public, government and industry of how the region sustains the Indigenous people who live there.

"So far, we've mapped the land use of maybe 150 people, and then we interviewed them afterward, asking what kind of development they want in the communities," Thompson says, adding that the research involves graduate and post-doctoral students from a variety of academic disciplines.

The team is planning to build a land use map for the east side of Lake Winnipeg. Currently, the area is largely only accessible by ice roads in the winter, and air or boat in the summer. But roads are expected soon to facilitate increased hydroelectric, mining and forestry activities.

In part, the research is supported by the Wabanong Nakaygum Okimawin Planning Initiative to develop a land use plan for the area through consultation with local communities, government and industry. Also spearheading the initiative is the Wabanong Nakaygum Okimawin Council of Chiefs that represents 16 First Nations communities in the region.

"It's a colossal area," Thompson says,



Team member Ryan Klatt holds a drone used for video-making and mapping.

adding it encompasses tens of thousands of square kilometres. "The residents there are actively using the land – that's the one thing our mapping is showing... they're still going out and using absolutely every square inch of this land."

And often their activities are at odds and even threatened by industrial development – economic activity that, for the most part, excludes First Nations communities.

In fact, after surveying these communities, researchers have discovered that there is profound trepidation regarding development.

"It's not that they don't want economic development, but when it comes to forestry, for example, they want it to be able to construct homes in their communities," Thompson says. "Or if they're going to be involved in mining, there has to be meaningful revenue sharing."

Researchers have also heard that these communities want development done differently.

"They're saying, 'We want the land to stay the same,' and that the development they want is human development," Thompson says.

In fact, part of the project involves helping communities with small-scale economic development like a 15-acre farm in Garden Hill with 1,200 chickens. Others have involved commercial fishing projects.

The problem is these communities face significant challenges to growing their economies.

"They don't have any banks, so it's almost impossible to run a business," says Thompson.

Moreover, the communities grapple with barriers not faced in other Manitoba communities that negatively affect health and well-being, in turn hampering economic development.

"For example, at least 50 per cent of the houses in these communities don't have running water," says Thompson.

The land use project should help address these challenges, she adds, and more broadly shed light onto a massive area of Manitoba. "In reality, only a tenth of the province has been mapped for land use, and it's never been done from the perspective of First Nations."

Once complete, the research will serve as an impetus for better relations between First Nations in Manitoba, and government and industry.

Perhaps it will even lead to a model similar to Northern Ontario, where no development occurs without consultation and approval of affected First Nations under the Far North Act, Thompson says.

"That hasn't occurred on the east side of the lake in Manitoba," she says. "This project will hopefully spur this process where First Nations just don't have consultation rights, but also a say in where development occurs."

And in turn they will share in the benefits.

"There has to be some revenue sharing because this land has been unused by anyone else, so for companies to claim (billions of dollars) in resources and walk away without sharing, while the community next door is without water, is absurd and wrong," Thompson says.

"We have to see a better balance."