



Photo by Vince Fedoroff

FULL HOUSE – Lindsay Staples of the Wildlife Management Advisory Council for the Yukon’s North Slope conference welcomed more than 150 participants to the two-day event Tuesday morning to discuss best practices in using traditional aboriginal knowledge to manage resources.

North Slope conference underway

How best to use traditional knowledge in the management of resources on the Yukon’s North Slope is the subject of a two-day conference that began Tuesday.

By Chuck Tobin on September 30, 2015

How best to use traditional knowledge in the management of resources on the Yukon’s North Slope is the subject of a two-day conference that began Tuesday.

More than 158 community representatives from across the North, scientists and observers registered for the event.

“This conference is not about making the case for the use of traditional knowledge in resource management,” Lindsay Staples, chair of the Wildlife Management Advisory Council for the North Slope, said in his opening remarks. “That case has already been made.

“So for this conference, I would hope we do not have to have the argument why is it important. We know it is important. We have to make sure it is used in the best way.”

It’s a conference to further the discussion about the collection of

traditional knowledge, and how to work with communities, he said. Staples said it's an opportunity to talk about working with the keepers of traditional knowledge in a respectful way, and how to document that knowledge: on paper, digitally, audio visual.... How do you communicate the knowledge gathered back to the community, how do you ensure traditional knowledge is used by tribunals and panels created to assess undertakings like major industrial projects, Staples asked.

He told the audience a lawyer friend of his who has worked extensively in the North once told him writing the use of traditional knowledge into law was the easy part, just as it was with its inclusion in the Inuvialuit Final Agreement of 1984. Putting it into practice is the hard part, particularly when you're dealing with different views from federal, territorial and provincial governments and agencies, Staples said.

Frank Pokiak, chair of the Inuvialuit Game Council, said in his opening remarks he's been involved in pushing for the use of traditional knowledge in resource management since the Inuvialuit agreement was signed in 1984.

"We have been doing that ever since our claim has been settled," he told conference participants. "At the beginning it was very difficult to point out traditional knowledge was very important to integrate with traditional science.

"We had a tough time," he continued. "But through time we did convince the government people it is very important to use traditional knowledge in all the decisions we make.

"I have seen it work, and it is working better and better."

But even still there is reluctance on the part of some, he said.

Pokiak said three separate times they've used traditional knowledge to influence an increase in the grizzly bear population, suggesting it's an example of the relationship the Inuvialuit can have with researchers.

He only wishes it was the same dealing with scientists studying polar bears who tend to do it their way, and their way only, he said.

"It's very difficult to sit down with them and convince them to use

traditional knowledge, because some times we are just ignored.” The North Slope conference is held every three years, and is generally hosted in Whitehorse.

Staples said it’s an important conference, and has been chaired in the past by some prominent Canadians, such as renowned aboriginal rights lawyer Thomas Berger who led the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline inquiry in the 1970s.

It’s been chaired by Hugh Faulkner, a former federal minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development.

This year’s chair, Robert Delury, began his career in the North as a biologist in the 1970s, and worked tirelessly negotiating the Inuvialuit Final Agreement and implementing the agreement into the 1990s, Staples explained.

Yukon’s North Slope, he said, is a large and important piece of the Inuvialuit settlement region with a significant abundance of wildlife, which is why it holds a special place in the final agreement.

“The intent of this conference is to obviously allow for the exchange of information on matters of concern on the North Slope,” Staples said. “There is a lot to learn from people across the North.”

In his welcoming remarks, Environment Yukon Minister Wade Istchenko said “We are all stewards of the environment, we all have an interest in protecting our environment for the sustainable use and enjoyment of future generations.

“I am hoping this conference builds on the practice of incorporating traditional knowledge in to resource management.” Something of a Serengeti of the North, the North Slope is a large plains-like area that slopes down from the foot of the Richardson Mountains into the Beaufort Sea. It provides habitat for scores of animals, from dall sheep to muskox, Porcupine caribou, grizzly and polar bears. It’s a summer home to a wide variety of migratory birds – swans, geese, ducks. The marine life along the coast as it slopes to the sea is teeming with whales, seals, sea birds....

It was the wildlife and their ways who taught the Inuvialuit of the

Mackenzie River delta and North Slope how to survive in an unforgiving landscape over thousands and thousands of years, the audience heard.

It is that knowledge that ties the Inuvialuit to the land and animals, that guides the Inuvialuit in their land use decisions.

Tuktoyaktuk hunter James Pokiak joined four other Inuvialuit harvesters from Aklavik and Inuvik in the opening panel discussion Tuesday. The Inuvialuit know what is happening with the water and the land, he said.

They may not have a science degree hanging on the wall, but they know, he said.

“We are scientists in our own way,” Pokiak told the audience.

Douglas Esagok of Inuvik said there needs to be certainty that traditional knowledge will be used when making resource management decisions.

Too often research initiatives say traditional knowledge “may” be considered, or “should” be considered. They should say “will” be considered, Esagok insisted, noting he has a history of working with scientists, as did four generations of his family before him.

Bill Archie of Aklavik said he’s worked with some biologists for years and years, but he’s also seen 13 or 14 biologists rotate through the Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

“It is tough to get the biologist to understand our way, what we are seeing,” he said.

Professor Brenda Parlee of the University of Alberta acknowledged there still exists a reluctance by some to embrace traditional knowledge as one would embrace western science.

“In different ways, we hear each other, but we do not necessarily listen,” said the professor who has done extensive field research in the North, particularly with barren land caribou.

Parlee said some see traditional knowledge as unsupported anecdotal evidence.

She, on the other hand, believes it can be both qualitative and quantitative.

“People have been hunting in the same place, using the same kind

of indicators for generations after generations,” Parlee said. Staples said as traditional knowledge takes its place beside traditional science, there will be more pressure to defend its validity.

Just as methods of western science and studies are put under the microscope by the scientific community, it is only fair that traditional knowledge receives the same level of scrutiny, he told the audience.

Lindsay said it is important to ensure the collection and quality of traditional knowledge is sound.

It is certain, he suggested, that when traditional knowledge is used to support decisions about sustainability, about where development can and cannot happen, people will be asking questions.

“So this conference will help us make sure the work we are doing is of the highest quality, so that when we are put under scrutiny, we meet the test,” said Staples.