



# Indigenous Maple Syrup Knowledge Network [IMSKN] 2014 Focus Group Report

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This report is a component of the Maple Syrup Innovation Toolkit. For other components see [www.resilientresearch.ca](http://www.resilientresearch.ca)

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## Maple Syrup Innovation Toolkit

This focus group report is part of a larger suite of final documents, called the Maple Syrup Innovation Toolkit, that are part of the final deliverables for this project. These documents include five summaries of work completed at earlier stages of this project, two workbooks (one Aboriginal-focused, one commercial industry-focused), a policy brief, and a video (<https://youtu.be/zLjyvmwel8Q>). The toolkit can be accessed at [www.resilientresearch.ca](http://www.resilientresearch.ca)

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## Introduction

Over the past six years, various research projects conducted by the Resilient Communities Research Collaborative of Wilfrid Laurier University have shown that there is continuing interest in maple sap and syrup (MSS) production amongst Indigenous populations as part of socio-cultural and spiritual practices and, for some, as a contribution to economic vitality. Across Ontario, Aboriginal producers have expressed a desire for increased knowledge sharing and the use of MSS production to contribute to broader revitalization efforts. To support these efforts, the research team, including Indigenous MSS producers, began to develop the idea of an 'Indigenous Maple Syrup Knowledge Network' (IMSKN), which proposes to focus on increasing networking and sharing opportunities about MSS for those who are interested. To this end, focus groups were held during the Spring/Summer of 2014 with Indigenous producers to discuss the direction and potential contribution of IMSKN.

Three focus groups were held throughout the province of Ontario: Sudbury on May 10<sup>th</sup> with 4 MSS producers in attendance, Guelph on May 24<sup>th</sup> with 5 MSS producers, and Gananoque on June 7<sup>th</sup> with 6 MSS producers and 1 representative of the National Aboriginal Forestry Association in attendance. In total, 16 Aboriginal people participated in the IMSKN focus groups, all of whom identified as Haudenosaunee, Cree, Anishinaabe or Métis. The age and gender of participants varied, as did their level of involvement in MSS practices; some participants produced MSS strictly for family and community, while others produced on a larger scale for profit. Each focus group was approximately 3 hours long, which resulted in about 10 hours worth of recorded materials.

These focus groups were conducted with three main goals in mind: 1) identify Indigenous maple syrup knowledge keepers; 2) discuss the most appropriate and efficient ways of sharing maple syrup knowledge; and 3) discuss the nature and structure of IMSKN. The following report summarizes these main points from all three IMSKN focus groups.

## Nature and Structure of IMSKN

The purpose of IMSKN is to create opportunity for sharing of MSS ways of knowing amongst Aboriginal populations. It has been suggested that a network may be helpful to facilitate this sharing. The following section provides an overview of focus group discussions surrounding the potentials of a network, including the structure, main challenges, the emphasis on the inclusion of youth and logistics pertaining to funding.

## Structure of Network

One of the main purposes of the IMSKN focus groups was to discuss what type of network would be best suited to facilitate the sharing maple syrup ways of knowing. The participants of the focus groups provided a diverse set of opinions and options surrounding the utilization of networks for IMSKN purposes.

Throughout all three focus groups, there was discussion about how networks already exist to share MS knowledge. While not considered to be 'formal' networks, numerous participants stated that Aboriginal producers already speak to each other, networking on many different occasions and situations. It was suggested that these networks can exist by virtue of geography. For example, individuals from the same community often speak and learn from each other about maple practices. Another participant spoke to the existence of regional networks, also based on geography but on a larger scale than the parameters of one community or reserve. One participant explained that he has, and will continue to, travel to close neighbouring communities to learn from Elders. Clearly networks exist amongst Aboriginal producers and individuals throughout the province of Ontario. IMSKN may have the potential to aid in the growth and further establishment of these networks, if desired by those who are already involved. At the discretion of those who are already involved within these networks, IMSKN may be able to provide further organization and growth to include more individuals and communities.

### Network Challenges

Various challenges were raised by the focus group participants regarding the establishment of a network(s) for the purposes of sharing of maple knowledge. A couple of participants voiced their desire for smaller, community/nation-based networks to ensure that the knowledge being shared is adequately protected as to avoid the potential for cultural appropriation and maintain the protection of intellectual property. Furthermore, it was emphasized by many that for the network to be effective, it must be dedicated to face-to-face methods of communication, including actively participating in maple processes and storytelling, among others. Several participants stated that it may be beneficial for the network to remain small for this reason, ensuring that priority is given to strategies that guarantee face-to-face knowledge sharing. These methods of communication will be discussed later within this report. Some participants also noted that a network might be difficult to maintain due to the busy and active schedules of individuals and communities. For this reason, one participant suggested that the network work on an individual basis.

From these discussions and the variety of opinions and options, there is consensus that most participants would prefer to have multiple smaller, regional based networks throughout the province to ensure that a) maple knowledge remains with the knowledge holder and b) face-to-face communication remains not only possible, but a priority.

### Inclusion of Youth

Regardless of the type of network(s) that is implemented through IMSKN, it is crucial to point out the emphasis that participants placed on ensuring the inclusion of youth within all plans. It was repeatedly stated throughout all three focus groups that knowledge transmission to the younger generations is imperative for the continuation of traditions and culture, including maple practices. Children have the ability to maintain the health of the trees and forest and revitalize the practices by teaching the future generations. There was consensus throughout the conversations that youth should be at the core of IMSKN. A couple of participants, who have experience teaching youth about maple practices, spoke about the eagerness of the children to continue learning once they had their first taste of working in the maple bush. Two participants spoke about their own experiences as children working in the sugar bush,

which is where their passion began. It was suggested by a participant that an excellent way to include youth could be through a mentorship program, which can be considered as a network. Evidently, teachings to youth is clearly important to the participants of the focus groups, and youth are eager to learn about maple practices; therefore, the inclusion of youth should be a predominant theme within IMSKN planning and implementation.

### **Logistics – Funding**

Some potential challenges regarding logistics were discussed amongst the participants of the focus groups, particularly surrounding funding. For the network to function, funding will be a necessity to cover expenses relating to communication and travel. A couple of participants stated that their communities do not have the funding to create and maintain a knowledge network, and that outside funding would be required, especially for travel expenses. However, while funding was discussed in relation to travel, a couple of participants pointed out that while some knowledge keepers may be willing to travel to share their knowledge, they would be more likely/willing to share if those seeking to learn came to them. It was also suggested that workshops could hold strong potential for disseminating knowledge to a larger group of people. These are important points, but depending on the layout of the network, IMSKN will still need funding for knowledge seekers to visit the knowledge keepers. Sources of outside funding were briefly mentioned, with some discussion surrounding academic grants, and other sources of funding, but more discussion and research is required to determine sources of funding for IMSKN.

### **Communication**

A number of different types of communication mechanisms were discussed at the focus groups. Given the variety of needs and opinions expressed, it seems clear that IMSKN would need to use a multi-pronged approach, including both technological and face-to-face communication strategies.

### **Communication Media**

In terms of online communication media, several mechanisms were suggested including email, a website and social media such as Facebook and Twitter. There seemed to be general consensus that email and a website could be useful tools for IMSKN communication. However, the focus group participants were quite divided regarding the use of social media. In particular, some participants felt as though communication tools like Twitter and Facebook would be ineffective for sharing the type of knowledge necessary for IMSKN purposes. Alternatively, other participants stated their interest in social media for IMSKN because of its effectiveness in the organization of events and its strong utilization by the youth populace, which, as has been discussed, is extremely important to the participants of the focus groups. The utilization of both text messaging and phone trees was mentioned briefly as possibly communication techniques.

### Face-to-Face Communication

All participants were in favour of face-to-face methods of knowledge sharing for IMSKN. Many participants spoke to the importance of building and maintaining relationships, given the type of knowledge that will be shared. In addition, trust also became a strong topic of discussion; it was stated on a couple of occasions that knowledge about MSS will not be shared unless a trusting relationship has been established. There seemed to be a general consensus that this type of relationship/connection can only be formed through face-to-face communication and interaction. Consequently, since participants maintained that the need for trusting relationship and connection is paramount, this could explain why there was opposition to some types of social media. It should also be mentioned that face-to-face communication strategies minimize the risks surrounding privacy and intellectual property infringements.

A variety of different face-to-face methods were discussed within the IMSKN focus groups. The most popular face-to-face method that was discussed involves direct participation in maple activities. There was a strong consensus amongst all three focus groups that the best way to learn about MSS is to directly partake in MSS practices and activities. It was suggested on numerous occasions that the best place to learn is in the sugar bush with the knowledge keepers. Given the historic tradition of 'learning-by-doing' in Aboriginal culture, this preferred method of sharing knowledge was expected. Additionally, in conjunction with direct participation, there was strong support for storytelling as a component of sharing knowledge within IMSKN, which is also a commonly used traditional method within Indigenous culture. In fact, throughout all three focus groups, participants told stories on numerous occasions to relay and emphasize different points and ideas they were making. Many participants agreed that storytelling and direct participation could exist simultaneously within IMSKN.

Outside of direct participation and storytelling, numerous other suggestions were made regarding how communication and sharing of knowledge within IMSKN would function, including roundtable discussions/meetings, conferences, presentations and tours. It is important to note that these strategies were offered to be in conjunction with direct participation and storytelling. These ideas were not made to be competing with each other, but instead offer a multi-pronged approach to communication mechanisms within IMSKN.

### Maple Syrup Knowledge Keepers

Another one of the main concentrations of the IMSKN focus group sessions was to identify individuals who could be key players within the network(s) for sharing information about maple syrup. These individuals can be characterized as 'knowledge keepers,' for they hold knowledge surrounding maple-sugaring activities. Identifying these knowledge keepers is crucial for the successful initiation of IMSKN. The participants of the focus groups identified an array of different knowledge keepers, predominantly including Elders, maple producers, community members (based on blood memory and family history) and non-human knowledge keepers.

### Elders

There seemed to be a general consensus amongst all three focus groups that Elders should be one of the predominant groups of knowledge keepers for IMSKN, which aligns with traditional Indigenous culture given that Elders are typically considered to be teachers. It was suggested repeatedly that the Elders would be able to share the information and knowledge that is needed for the successful functioning of IMSKN because of their lifelong experience in practice and ceremony. It was also stated on a couple of occasions that most Elders look forward to sharing their knowledge about maple, especially when those seeking to learn come to the Elders' home communities. The more interest that is shown in maple practices, the happier and more willing Elders are to share their experiences and knowledge. Going back to the discussion surrounding how knowledge will be shared in collaboration with the suggestions of Elders being the predominant knowledge keepers, it seems as though most of the participants of the focus groups would prefer IMSKN to follow a traditional Indigenous approach: Elders (the teachers of communities) sharing knowledge through direct participation and storytelling.

However, there were a couple of challenges expressed by participants of the focus groups regarding Elders as knowledge keepers within IMSKN. Three individuals expressed that even though Elders hold the knowledge, it can be difficult for Elders to share this knowledge due to time and resource constraints, in addition to geography. Furthermore, while some Elders may be willing to share maple knowledge, IMSKN needs to be cautious about the way in which some topics are addressed and follow all cultural protocols specific to each community and/or nation. In addition to this point, one participant pointed out that the Elders of his community have lost their traditions, and therefore must seek Elders from other communities for teachings.

Clearly Elders are very important knowledge keepers of maple syrup practices, but there may be some potential challenges surrounding how active of a role they will be able to play within IMSKN for a couple of reasons, as outlined above.

### Maple Producers

Another group of knowledge holders regarding maple syrup practices are producers themselves. Most of the producers who attended the focus groups are open to sharing their knowledge through an IMSKN structure, especially if it is taught through direct participation and is in their own sugar bush/community. Once again, participants agreed that the best way to learn maple practices is through practicing and shadowing a producer and/or knowledge keeper in the bush.

However, as pointed out by a couple of participants, it is important to keep in mind that there are not only protocols that need to be followed in regards to knowledge sharing, but that there is also some information and knowledge that cannot be shared for various reasons surrounding cultural confidentiality. Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that different producers hold different knowledges, especially producers from different communities. Therefore, the knowledge that producers (or any knowledge keeper) shares can/will be specific and dependent on their personal knowledge base, their Nation/community, geographic location and cultural protocols, among other factors. Additionally, as one participant pointed out, all individuals hold different bundles of knowledge about maple syrup



production: some producers may hold knowledge about preserving the maple bush, while others may hold knowledge regarding economics. Clearly producers have a wide range of knowledge, which based on the responses of producers from the focus groups, are willing to share with those who wish to learn through an IMSKN structure.

### Non-Human Knowledge Keepers & Blood Memory

Within Indigenous Canadian culture, many teachings are explained and taught through non-human knowledge keepers. For example, trees, spirits and birds can teach us (and have taught us through history) about producing maple syrup. One participant of the focus groups spoke directly to this reality, explaining that not all knowledge keepers are human and that we have a lot to learn from the natural environment. Therefore, IMSKN must incorporate non-human knowledge keepers within its educational framework. However, the same participant also expressed concern that knowledge seekers may not be able to understand the lessons from the natural environment. Perhaps within IMSKN, human knowledge keepers (producers, Elders) could interpret the knowledges from the natural world to those who are seeking to learn. While only two individuals spoke about non-human knowledge keepers directly, it is expected that this type of knowledge sharing will be utilized within IMSKN teachings based on the strong desire from the focus groups to rely on direct participation in the maple bush.

Along the same lines as non-human knowledge keepers, one participant of the focus groups briefly mentioned the idea of a vast amount of individuals within communities having the knowledge of maple practices based on blood memory. Many people within Aboriginal cultures believe that knowledge can be passed down through blood; therefore, some individuals know instinctively how to produce maple, without having to be taught physically by another person. This is an interesting concept to consider in relation to knowledge keepers when implementing IMSKN.

### Community & Family Learning

There was some discussion within the focus groups that focused on collective knowledge keepers, including both families and communities as a whole. Instead of focusing on individuals, these participants focused on how their community/family as a whole taught them to produce, iterating that their learning was based on a collective effort. In this sense, as previously mentioned in the discussion surrounding maple producers, each individual knowledge keeper within the collective community and/or family holds a different piece/perspective of knowledge that is then shared within those seeking to learn. Therefore, the title of knowledge keeper is not only for the individual, but can also be applied to those who offer knowledge as a collective unit. This is important to recognize in regards to the challenges surrounding intellectual properties; for communal knowledge to be shared ethically, the whole community must agree.

The participants of the focus groups offered valuable input regarding the knowledge keepers of maple syrup practices. From individual human teachers like Elders and maple producers, to non-living teachers and blood memories, to collective communities and families, the participants of the focus groups offered much to consider when designing the structure of IMSKN in regards to knowledge keepers.

Clearly knowledge keepers come in many different forms, which is important facet of knowledge that the structure of IMSKN will surely reflect.

### Willingness to Share Knowledge

In relation to the sharing of knowledge, an important issue that was brought up numerous times throughout the focus groups is the willingness of human knowledge keepers to share with those who are seeking to learn. As discussed, many participants spoke about the importance of sharing knowledge to ensure the survival of culture. Some participants spoke about personal experiences with lost knowledge, which has created disconnect with their culture and community. Others spoke about their love of sharing their own knowledge with others seeking to learn. However, alternatively, one participant explicitly stated that it is unlikely for some knowledge keepers to share their knowledge for various reasons, including time of year, location and who they are speaking to, among various other reasons. Other members of the focus groups, while keen on the idea of sharing knowledge, agreed, unsure as to whether or not all knowledge keepers would be comfortable sharing knowledge about maple processes through IMSKN. A couple of participants determined that each knowledge keeper could only make this decision on an individual basis. Furthermore, it was pointed out that due to the amount of meetings that are already required of community members (potential knowledge keepers), it might be difficult for individuals to actually participate in further meetings and sessions surrounding IMSKN, which is a potential challenge to keep in mind.

Even though some challenges exist regarding the willingness of knowledge keepers to share knowledge through IMSKN, participants are optimistic about the potential of IMSKN as a sharing network. Most participants agreed that the decision to share knowledge will be made on an individual basis by each human knowledge keeper. Ultimately, the willingness to speak and share maple knowledge lies in the hands of each individual knowledge keeper and/or community.

### Exploitation of Knowledge

One of the important issues expressed by participants surrounding the sharing of knowledge is based on the fear of exploitation of knowledge. As has been shown throughout Canadian history, non-Indigenous settlers have been known to exploit Indigenous knowledge, oftentimes for economic profit, which is a significant threat for Indigenous knowledge surrounding maple-sugaring activities. Four participants of the focus groups directly expressed this challenge, questioning how these knowledges can be protected from exploitation. Alternatively, there are some individuals who expressed concern not over the use of Indigenous Knowledge in relation to maple, but the need for appropriate accreditation to the Nations/individuals/communities who provided the knowledge. It was agreed upon by some within the focus groups that while members of IMSKN should be cautious, fear of cultural appropriation should not deter knowledge from being shared within the network. It was stated on a couple of occasions that sugaring knowledge should be shared as much as possible to maintain the culture and activities surrounding maple. One participant shared personal experiences of struggle regarding knowledge loss as a youth, reiterating the importance of having this knowledge available to all those who wish to learn. Moreover, one participant explained that all knowledge derives from the natural world, meaning that it belongs to no one. Therefore, this knowledge should be shared freely for all those who wish to learn.

Evidently, varying opinions exist regarding the risks of maple knowledge exploitation. While all participants do agree that there is a risk of exploitation, there are varying opinions of how to mitigate this risk.

### Ideas for Discussion

The final goal of the focus groups was to gather information pertaining to the types of discussion and topics that individuals would want to partake in when IMSKN is established. When IMSKN becomes a reality, what do members want to talk about? Share? Do? A number of different ideas were discussed throughout all three focus groups.

Many participants suggested that ecological health be a topic for sharing and discussion within IMSKN. Preserving the trees and ecosystems shows respect for the natural environment and ensures that the sap continues to flow for years to come. This is knowledge that all maple producers should understand, which is why many focus group participants are eager to have it included as a main topic of discussion once IMSKN is established. One participant stated that while teaching about ecology, trees should be humanized to ensure their complete protection and respect. Along the same lines, climate change was brought up as a topic in need of discussion within IMSKN.

Another predominant suggestion that many participants want included within IMSKN is to discuss and share knowledge surrounding economics of maple syrup production. While some participants wanted to acknowledge that economics is outside of the realm of traditional maple processes, other participants noted that economic information is crucial to maintain a stable maple operation. Therefore, as the majority of the participants suggested, economic information should be a topic of discussion within IMSKN.

In addition to basic economics, many participants also stated their interest in discussions surrounding general producer information, stating that it would be helpful for implementing the best and most appropriate maple practices. For example, one participant suggested that he would be eager to learn about the best and most efficient energy sources for maple production. However, another participant warned that much of the technical information has been exhausted and is unnecessary for further teaching, particularly for those who are already producing. Therefore, in line with discussions surrounding technical knowledge and information, many participants would also like IMSKN to focus on teaching traditional Indigenous Knowledge, including strong aspects of storytelling and spirituality. It is important to the majority of the participants that IMSKN has a focus on keeping traditional practices and beliefs alive, as has been demonstrated in the other facets of this report surrounding knowledge keepers and methods of communication.

As presented, there are clearly many ideas and suggestions for the topics of discussion and sharing for once IMSKN is established. As IMSKN progresses, more ideas will undoubtedly arise and be continuously implemented as the network grows and adapts to best practices.

## **Moving Forward...**

An abundance of information, knowledge and suggestions were explored and discussed throughout all three focus groups about the direction and logistics surrounding the Indigenous Maple Syrup Knowledge Network. Because of the vast array of excellent opinions and suggestions, it is likely that a multi-pronged approach will be utilized for the numerous different elements of IMSKN to ensure the most advantageous and positive experience for all who wish to be involved.

The Resilient Communities Research Team will continue to work closely with Indigenous MS producers to ensure that IMSKN is designed and implemented to meet the needs and desires that were expressed throughout the focus groups, along with any future suggestions and/or opinions. With continued partnerships and determination, IMSKN will surely continue to progress and aid in the revitalization of maple practices amongst Indigenous communities across Turtle Island.