

# Community Sharing Circle Briefing Note Poplar River First Nation, Manitoba

*Briefing Note of IISD's Natural and Social Capital Program and the IISD Foresight Group*

**October 2011**

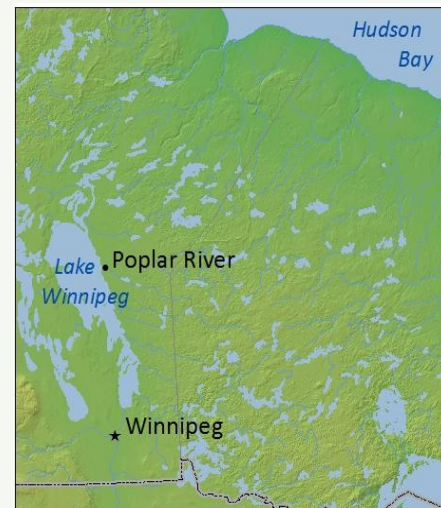
## *Purpose and Context of the Sharing Circle*

An interactive sharing circle-style workshop was held in Poplar River on March 22, 2011 to explore a series of questions to better understand how the local environment helps maintain and improve the well-being of First Nations peoples living in remote communities. The sharing circle also discussed observed changes in the local environment and how the community might possibly cope with and adapt to future environmental changes related to climate variability and change.

The sharing circle was facilitated by the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD). The insights compiled serve several purposes, including informing local planning efforts and the Pimachawin Aki's proposal for World Heritage Site status. IISD will also harness the insights to help advance practical terminology for communicating to policy-makers the important linkages between human well-being and the variety of services provided by the environment.

## *About Poplar River First Nation*

Poplar River First Nation is located on the east side of Lake Winnipeg at the mouth of the Poplar River, approximately 340 km north of Winnipeg. Their traditional territory consists of the Poplar River/Nanowin Park Reserve, which covers a surface area of approximately 7,773 km<sup>2</sup> and is located entirely in Manitoba. There are no outstanding treaty land entitlements on their land. The Poplar River First Nation has a registered population of 1,606 people as of August 2011, with 1,210 living on the reserve.<sup>1</sup> Of the total population, 400 people declared being in the labour force, working mostly in the services sector (health care, social services, educational services, government services, sales) with the rest of the employment in the trades, primary and processing industries (transport, manufacturing, utilities, equipment operators and related occupations). Fishing, wild rice harvesting and trapping also support livelihoods within the community. There is no permanent road access to the community and it is serviced by scheduled and/or chartered flights with dock facilities for float planes and boats.



<sup>1</sup> First Nation Profiles: [http://pse5-esd5.ainc-inac.gc.ca/fnp/Main/Search/FNMain.aspx?BAND\\_NUMBER=277&lang=eng](http://pse5-esd5.ainc-inac.gc.ca/fnp/Main/Search/FNMain.aspx?BAND_NUMBER=277&lang=eng)

## What Was Shared by Participants

Poplar River First Nation is a community that has always had a deep connection to the land, but with the changing times, both socially and environmentally, that connection has altered a great deal from how the elders would have described it when they were children. The community has begun to realize these impacts and started to think about how they might address, mitigate and/or adapt to them. The workshop served to highlight the important contributions that the natural environment provides to the community and explored the changes that it has undergone and will likely undergo in the future. With future scenarios in mind, the workshop wrapped up with the community identifying actions currently in place and those which they felt were needed to address future risks.

The following is a summary of the sharing circle discussion.

## Contribution of the Environment to the Well-Being of the Community

*"Many of us still live off the land. If we couldn't, we couldn't live here. Animals have the same problem."*

Poplar River First Nations participants shared many ways in which the local environment contributes to their well-being.

SERVICE PROVIDED BY THE ENVIRONMENT	CONTRIBUTION TO WELL-BEING
* Clean air and water are very important	* Without these, we couldn't have the others * Water that affects the kidneys and guts. It all started when we stopped eating fresh meat (e.g., beavers, muskrats, fish) and drinking the fresh water from the river. * Asthma was unheard of in previous generations, now it is everywhere.
* The natural environment provides good food, including berries, fish, moose, geese and ducks.	* It has sustained us for thousands of years. Most important is that these are available for children. All these things affect people.
* A beautiful, clean environment	* Brings health to the community
* Trees	* Protect houses in windstorms * Need trees to brace the river bank against erosion. Starting to see erosion on the north side of the river after the trees were blown down. Now there are only small trees holding the bank together. * Give off oxygen, which is important for life. But the kids don't understand that— we need to make sure we don't cut down all the trees (worried of having someone come around with a Big Idea)
* Ice and predictable weather	* Allows the winter road to be built * Without the winter road, we wouldn't be able to afford our current diet. * The winter road is important; when it closes, it affects everyone both financially and psychologically
* The environment provides	* Spiritual and cultural benefits
* Bees	* Hardly any bees last year—there used to be loads of them. If there are no bees, nothing gets pollinated and nothing lives.
* Natural forest fires are important	* They will stay within their bounds and are not unstoppable. We need these types of forest fires. Man-made fires, however, burn out of control and do not stay within their bounds.
* Mood and attitude	* Change in weather is related to depression and mood in the community * When it rains too much, there are definitely shifts in the mood of the community
* Medicinal plants	* Are still there; only the berries are affected, maybe by the heat.

All of these are connected. In particular, all settlements are around water have a river where they started out from. Animals are the same way—they work together to stabilize their own environment (e.g., beavers build dams).

The sharing circle participants noted that elders considered all things when planning for development. For instance, when the road was being built in Poplar River, they considered how it would affect the different animals and their needs. There is a need to preserve the land to have a healthy environment.

## Observed Changes in the Environment

*“Earth used to look after itself; now we have to work to maintain the environment. Can’t just throw things in the water anymore. Need to teach the children why.”*

Participants in the sharing circle described a range of specific changes in the natural environment that have occurred in recent years.

TYPE OF CHANGE	OBSERVATIONS
<p>* Weather, and snow and ice conditions have changed</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Recent winters have been mild (not this year).</li> <li>* Last year we had an early thaw, which affects the winter road.</li> <li>* Storms are more violent now.</li> <li>* Nowhere near the amount of snow there used to be</li> <li>* Texture of snow is different now</li> <li>* Snow and ice depth has changed. River ice, for instance, used to be about 3 to 6 feet deep. Now it is often about 2 feet deep.</li> <li>* Elders used to be able to predict the weather, but now that is not possible. Can't predict ice conditions, precipitation, etc.</li> <li>* Ice: only a bit of blue ice now, most of it is white slush-ice.</li> <li>* Heat waves used to be 25 to 28 degrees for a week. Nowadays it can be in the mid-30s for more than a week.</li> </ul>
<p>* Changes in animals</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Some animals are making a comeback. Bald eagles are back.</li> <li>* Golden eagles are also moving in (there didn't used to be golden eagles here). Other birds have moved in too: magpies, some strange white bird.</li> <li>* There are more porcupines now.</li> <li>* No frogs. Frogs are a sign of a healthy environment. They have disappeared in recent years. There used to be so many frogs that they were deafening at times.</li> <li>* Fewer ducks now</li> <li>* Hardly any bees last year; there used to be loads of them. If there are no bees, nothing gets pollinated and nothing lives.</li> <li>* The snow worms are gone—they disappeared maybe 20 years ago.</li> <li>* Trapping has changed because of the changed animal availability.</li> <li>* Many species have disappeared; for instance, we don't see or hear squirrels much anymore, and there are hardly any rabbits any more.</li> <li>* Different bugs coming around. Wood ticks are moving north. They're in Berens River now.</li> <li>* Fish are affected by pollution.</li> <li>* Foods taste different than they used to.</li> </ul>

* Moisture conditions	<p>* Everything is drying up. Berries are scorched, there are very few berries now. There used to be many saskatoon berries. Now they bloom, but they have scabs on them.</p> <p>* Water from the muskeg is disappearing—the year before last, the water dropped 2 feet.</p> <p>* Poplar trees are northern trees, but the heat dries out the leaves now.</p> <p>* Berries dry up these days.</p> <p>* Hardly any lichen on the rocks now. There is what appears to be mould on the lichens. Perhaps they dried up?</p> <p>* Don't see juniper berries on the juniper bushes now.</p> <p>* A lot of weeds in the grass now (e.g., alfalfa), and a lot of thistles and thorns and burrs.</p> <p>* Flooding is possible. It used to flood when the snow melted, now the streams are blocked by culverts, etc. Things are not the same as they used to be.</p> <p>* Dust storms have been more common in the last 10 years.</p>
* The water quality has declined	<p>* There is a big glob of algae in Lake Winnipeg, but also a big brown glob of slime (not algae) growing bigger every year. Worried it will kill the fish.</p>
* Vegetation changes	<p>* One person noted the appearance of weird bumps/growths on some plants, and that the varieties of plants are changing too. Don't know where these plants came from, or how or why they are here.</p>
* People have changed	<p>* Psychological state has changed (e.g., young people afraid of the end of the world)</p> <p>* Teaching didn't used to stop at the end of school.</p> <p>* "Now there is garbage everywhere and I have to live in that garbage." We live in a disposable society.</p> <p>* The attitudes of respect have changed: an animal has just as much of a right to life as a person.</p> <p>* What you do will come back on you. If all you do is take, take, take, and abuse the environment, the environment will come back to haunt us. There are consequences to our attitudes.</p> <p>* Worries about the ozone layer and everything burning up. Maybe the rivers will dry up. Summers are pretty hot these days. Needed to water the garden this summer because there was not enough rain.</p> <p>* People are getting sick more frequently.</p>

### *Possible Ways to Cope with Future Changes in the Weather*

With respect to potential changes in future weather conditions, participants of the sharing circle offered a number of ways to cope and adapt.

- All-weather road to replace the winter road
- Planting trees for erosion control, wind breaks and to protect against dust
- Start supplying our own power using renewable sources. Water levels are rising on one of the nearby rivers and we could put in a hydro generator. Could try wind or solar as well.
- Education about UV rays, danger zones on the river/ice, boat safety
- Fisheries will suffer because of algae—need to do something (diversify economy somehow)
- Change how houses are built to keep the mould out.
- Have to learn to survive with what is coming
- Monitoring plan for everything (weather, animals, etc.)
- Land management plan

## *About the Researchers and Funder*

### **Researcher and Facilitator: The International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD)**

Website: [www.iisd.ca](http://www.iisd.ca)

IISD contributes to sustainable development by advancing policy recommendations on international trade and investment, economic policy, climate change and energy, measurement and assessment, and natural resources management, and the enabling role of communication technologies in these areas. We report on international negotiations and disseminate knowledge gained through collaborative projects, resulting in more rigorous research, capacity building in developing countries, better networks spanning the North and the South, and better global connections among researchers, practitioners, citizens and policy-makers.

IISD's vision is better living for all-sustainably; its mission is to champion innovation, enabling societies to live sustainably. IISD is registered as a charitable organization in Canada and has 501(c)(3) status in the United States. IISD receives core operating support from the Government of Canada, provided through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), and from the Province of Manitoba. The Institute receives project funding from numerous governments inside and outside Canada, United Nations agencies, foundations and the private sector.

IISD's new Natural and Social Capital Program is about people, places and planning for sustainability, and its innovative IISD Foresight Group researches, develops and applies integrated and forward-looking assessment tools and processes for local, regional and sector-based planning.

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### **Funder: StewardEdge Inc.**

Website: [www.stewardedge.ca](http://www.stewardedge.ca)

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## *For More Information*

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