# Alternative Research Methods and Outputs:
# Sharing Community-Based Knowledge Through Art

Supplemental paper prepared for Environmental Studies 400C
(*in conjunction with* "Artistic Works and Statement" *and* "Gooseneck Grazing" *poem*)

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Introduction

There are many communities around the world where the word "research" may induce shivers of disgust and painful memories for community members that have been involved in research projects. After years of being treated like laboratory subjects in field experiments, people have had enough. There are many reasons why these research projects have failed to produce enthusiasm in communities—Cheadle (1997, p.7) suggests that all communities are unique and therefore "one-size-fits-all" programs don't work, hostility arises when researchers don't respect community members as equal partners, and it is rare that anything beneficial is left behind for the community at the conclusion of the project. In short, communities are sick of having outsiders arrive in their space, take what they need, and then vanish without a trace, never once calling for the locals to share what they know. As Ansley and Gaventa write, "A knowledge system that discredits and devalues common, everyday knowledge serves to disempower common people as well" (1997, p.46).

Community-based research has been proposed as an alternative to the objective, positivist mode of research that is generally accepted as the norm for academic projects. While no strict definition exists for the term community-based research, components include research being done *with* people rather than *on* people to empower rather than exploit them (Kurelek, 1992), and the integration of research, education, and positive action in the project (Green, George, et al., 1997). While it is often a more frustrating and time-consuming process to use, community-based

research supporters believe it is the only way that research can actually benefit the community, allowing members to become empowered (St. Denis, 1992).

Art as Research Output

As an alternative method, community-based research challenges many preconceptions of what constitutes "academic research." As Checkoway writes, "Reconceptualizing research would broaden the prevailing paradigm to include other ways of knowing and 'the welfare of society' as elements in knowledge development" (1997, p.310). The stuffy pattern of positivistic research methodology needs to be changed, to become more holistic and inclusive of non-official knowledge. Communities are rich with local expertise and wisdom, and it may be that members are simply waiting for a more alternative outlet to allow this knowledge to be shared with the outside world.

This alternative forum could be a public presentation or slide show, or a community workshop. Community knowledge may be discovered during formal training in research techniques, or in the collection of results. Or, I propose, it may be in the creation of artwork that reflects the local environment. Community-based research, at its core, involves getting to know the community, including its physical and human resources, assets, needs and priorities. Visual art can be a way to share this experience of familiarization with the local area.

If community-based research states "benefiting the community" as one of its main objectives, art can surely fill this role, both in terms of economic payback and in

building on social capital networks. In former resource-based communities such as those found in the Clayoquot Sound region, towns and settlements are looking for alternatives to forestry and fishing, previous economic mainstays. Increasingly, they are looking towards tourism to lift their economies (Dobell & Bunton, 2001). By using skills and knowledge provided by community members, known as social capital, the pressure on the natural capital of the area is reduced. In making the beautiful scenery and natural treasures of the region better known through the distribution of paintings, drawings, photographs, and other medium, visual art can also encourage support for the preservation of the surrounding environment.

As an area of past and continuing conflict between industry, environmental groups, local government and First Nations groups, the Clayoquot Sound Region benefits from any projects that seek to build community between these groups (Dobell & Bunton, 2001). As a positive method of sharing knowledge and displaying images that most locals can relate to, visual art can act to strengthen the social ties between the disparate groups. These ties grow into networks, and bring a sense of solidarity between the region's inhabitants.

Personal Experiences in Clayoquot Sound Region

While spending time in Tofino with a UVic Environmental Studies class looking at community-based research in the region, I was greatly affected by the local knowledge and the stunning scenery found in the area. I saw an area rich in both physical and

human treasures, and a community looking for ways to improve the methodology of research that has and continues to be used on them.

For me, community-based research offers a way of sharing, rather than stealing, knowledge. By creating a series of paintings and sketches based on my experience exploring the Clayoquot Sound region under the guidance of local experts, I hope I am able to share my knowledge and skills not just with the communities of the Clayoquot Sound region but possibly others as well, so that the natural beauty of the region can reach even farther.

Guides such as Nadine Crooks, George Patterson, and Barb Beasley gave me their insights on the complex relationships of humans and organisms in the rainforest. They allowed me the opportunity to witness up close the amazing lushness of this region and to experience the indescribable green and brown interface between the living and dead, the nourished and the nourisher. These experiences inspired the rainforest components of my series. Clayoquot is much more than just rainforest, however. It is the coast, the ocean, the intertidal zones. The Sound impressed me in equal but different ways than the forest. Again, it was local community members with their knowledge and experience that allowed me to spend time near the water and learn what lives and washes up on its shores. For this, I thank Barb Beasley (again), Jur Bekker, Gerry Schreiber, Stan Boychuk, and Josie Osborne for giving me experiences that inspired the intertidal pieces in my series.

Conclusion

Hopefully, my art and that produced by others in the region will share the beauty and intricacies to be found in the natural world in Clayoquot Sound. Although my pieces show the physical environment, I would not have been able to do them without social networks developed with humans.

While my paintings and drawings may not constitute "research" in the strict sense of the word, I feel they have a place in community-based research methodology. In a region desperately searching for alternative research methods, my art can be considered an alternative research output designed to facilitate love of the region in insiders and outsiders alike. Having this in common can then lead to a more secure and positive base for future research in the area. With luck, these paintings can be a small step in turning the local "cringe" response to research into a smile.

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