



**ADVICE TO COUNCIL NO: 07-02**

**Re: “Engaging Indigenous Communities in the Work of the CEC”**

The Joint Public Advisory Committee (JPAC) of the Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC) of North America;

**IN ACCORDANCE** with Article 16(4) of the North American Agreement on Environmental Cooperation (NAAEC), which states that JPAC “may provide advice to Council on any matter within the scope of this agreement [...] and on the implementation and further elaboration of this agreement, and may perform such other functions as the Council may direct”;

**RECOGNIZING THAT**

1. North American indigenous communities comprise peoples whose ancestors inhabited North America before the arrival of colonists.
2. Their loss of land and control over living conditions, displacement of political institutions, restricted economic opportunity, weakening of social institutions, suppression of beliefs and spirituality, and breakdown of cultural rules, language and values have resulted in individual and collective loss of identity of many North American indigenous communities.<sup>1</sup>
3. Poverty, limited education, cultural barriers, discrimination, jurisdictional problems, and power imbalances with historic precedents are the basis of many of the health and social problems facing indigenous peoples at the start of the twenty-first century.<sup>2</sup>
4. The indigenous peoples of North America have a special relationship with the earth and all living things in it. This relationship is based on the recognition of human interdependence with the natural world and values associated with that interdependence. Resources were used with the understanding that one takes only what is needed so that future generations will not be put in peril.<sup>3</sup>
5. Environmental degradation affects the health and well-being of indigenous communities by: i) having negative consequences on human health (pollutants and contaminants); ii) reducing the supply and purity of traditional foods and herbal medicines via contamination and disruption of wildlife habitat; and iii) eroding the ways of life of communities that are dependent on the purity of the land, water, flora and fauna to support the indigenous communities’ cultures, languages and spiritual health.

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<sup>1</sup> Young, T. K. (1994), *The Health of Native Americans: Towards a Biocultural Epidemiology*, Toronto: Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Based on draft website for Healing Mother Earth – Convening of Indigenous Peoples for the Healing of Mother Earth: A Conference of North American Indigenous Peoples on Environmental Health Issues.

6. Indigenous communities have much information, ideas, innovations and best practices that can be shared amongst themselves and the world, to inspire and identify solutions to our environmental problems.

**HAVING** conducted a workshop in Winnipeg, Canada, on Engaging Indigenous Communities in the Work of the CEC on Tuesday, 25 September 2007, and Wednesday, 26 September 2007, which featured sessions with expert speakers from indigenous communities, government agencies, nongovernmental organizations and institutions from Canada, the United States and Mexico and having participated in the CEC's Trade and Environment sponsored forum, entitled "The North American Indigenous Communities Renewable Energy Forum," on Monday, 24 September 2007;

**PROVIDES** the following recommendations for consideration by Council:

In terms of the short-, medium- and long-term actions within the three program priorities, the CEC should:

### **Trade and environment**

Short-term:

- Document examples where indigenous communities have enhanced the environment and conservation via alternative energy projects in all three countries.
- Extend the participation of indigenous communities in discussions of how to enhance ecotourism. It is imperative that these communities capture the benefits of these activities so as not only to enhance their own economic well-being but also to protect the environment for future generations.

Medium-term:

- Promote and support projects that meet the multiple needs of indigenous communities, including waste management, economic development, energy self-sufficiency, conservation and human health protection.

Long-term:

- Examine opportunities presented in maintaining indigenous communities' culture, languages, traditional environmental knowledge and values to protect or restore their lands and waters that support high biodiversity and species-at-risk.

### **Capacity building**

Short-term:

- Currently, the CEC is working with the Lifeline Group (US EPA) to assess the dietary risks of lindane/HCH in Mexico. The Tribal Lifeline Project is a state-of-the-art risk assessment tool that can be used to assess a host of toxic substances affecting indigenous communities. The project builds capacity via training and provides vital information to guide decisions about toxics. We encourage the CEC to work directly with indigenous communities across North America that are interested in customizing these dietary assessment tools for use.

Medium-term:

- Integrate the concerns of indigenous communities into **every** CEC program. Their concerns are currently reflected in a number of CEC programs, including Sound Management of Chemicals (SMOC), renewable energy, and PRTR. Integrating indigenous concerns into every program will not only increase the CEC's impact but also help the organization find projects that meet multiple needs and constituents.

Long-term:

- Engage in stakeholder workshops with indigenous communities to continue to develop trust-based partnerships. Such relationships will allow the CEC to leverage its expertise with other organizations (NGOs, government, business, financial institutions, etc.) and develop joint pilot projects that meet multiple needs sustainably.

### **Information for Decision-making**

Short-term:

- Extend participation of indigenous communities and integrate traditional knowledge in ecoregional planning discussions and projects of the CEC.
- Provide an Internet site where indigenous communities from across North America can share their success stories and experiences related to conservation, alternative energy development, ecotourism development, watershed protection, airshed protection, waste management and/or habitat protection. It is via the communication of such inspiring stories that other indigenous communities and civil society as a whole can learn and be inspired to participate as well.

Medium-term:

- Listen to all voices. As the CEC increases its interactions with indigenous communities, it is important that it demonstrate how it interprets and acts on what they have heard from their regular interactions with indigenous communities. The voices of tribal/First Nation representatives must not be the only voices heard—women, the Elders, and the young must also be part of the discussions. The reality is that not everyone has access to the Internet or, in some cases, is able to read. Consequently, efforts must be made to **receive** and **disseminate** information to indigenous communities via a host of media, including radio, seminars/workshops, town hall-style meetings, newspapers, television, documents and the Internet.

Long-term:

- Incorporate a holistic approach to promoting and achieving coordination and cooperation between the Parties on environmental issues. Only by working directly with indigenous peoples of North America who have a special relationship with the earth and all living things in it can this truly be learned. They have told JPAC that the earth provides each indigenous group with its required

sustenance, well-being, culture, language, traditions and economic systems.<sup>4</sup> Hence, environmental degradation affects all these interacting systems. Such a holistic approach would enrich the work of the CEC and guide it in its future projects, and if responsive to the needs articulated by indigenous communities, could enrich their futures as well.

**Approved by the JPAC members  
20 December 2007**

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<sup>4</sup> Based on draft website for Healing Mother Earth – Convening of Indigenous Peoples for the Healing of Mother Earth: A conference of North American Indigenous Peoples on Environmental Health Issues.