Foothills’ Aboriginal Initiative Program

Research managers of the Foothills Model Forest are positive about progress being made by the Aboriginal Initiative Program. While the program has had some challenges during the first two years of operation, researchers are confident about the strong contribution that traditional knowledge can make to sustainable forest management.

Of 17 Aboriginal communities who have traditionally used the Foothills Model Forest area, two have embarked on Traditional Culture Studies, a comprehensive collection of traditional knowledge that embodies the Aboriginal way of life and how it is connected with the land. The result will be the creation of a database housing location data on spiritual areas, gravesites, berry- and food-gathering areas, and trapline locations.

Each Aboriginal community collects its own data, and the Foothills Model Forest supplies the expertise and resources to facilitate the process. For example, researchers are helping project coordinators in each of the communities develop skills in interviewing and use of global positioning system instrumentation. Once interview material and site locations have been collected, the data will be downloaded into a geographic information system database.

A program advisory group has developed a protocol to assure Aboriginal communities that all information collected is theirs and remains their property once the traditional culture studies have been completed.

At the same time, Model Forest staff are working on the development of a referral process between Aboriginal communities and industry. Seventeen communities originally indicated an interest in traditional use on the landbase, which could require a company to approach all communities before moving forward with a project. While the referral process is still in the earliest stages of discussion, it could provide efficiencies for both sides.

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As industrial activities increase on the Foothills Model Forest land base, important links that exist between Aboriginal communities and the land base may be jeopardized. A referral process being developed by the Foothills Model Forest in conjunction with Aboriginal communities may streamline communication between both sides.

As many as 17 different Aboriginal communities have historical links to the land that makes up the Foothills Model Forest. By undertaking Traditional Culture Studies, Aboriginal communities are beginning to document these links.