

TRIBAL RISK ASSESSMENTS

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SUMMARY

“Cumulative impacts to tribal cultures are a combination of pre-existing stressors (existing conditions or co-risk factors) and any other contamination or new activity that affects environmental quality. Characterizing risks or impacts ... entails telling the cumulative story about risks to trust resources and a cultural way of life. Equity assessments could also be performed in a way that describes these systems-level cumulative risks/impacts. This requires improvements in metrics based on an understanding of the unbreakable ties between people, their cultures, and their resources.”¹

It has been recorded in judicial proceedings that these activities (cultural and subsistence practices) are no less important to Native Americans than the air they breathe (United States v. Winans, 1905, 198 U.S. 371, 381, 1905).

Risk management question of which people and lifestyle to protect

A tribe’s natural resource base is a source of cultural identity and religion, a nutritional and medicinal buffer against poverty, and a reservoir of environmental knowledge and biodiversity.

Only tribal cultural experts can explain the magnitude of impact to traditional lifestyles and Trust resources that pollution or other environmental stressors causes. Only these cultural experts can place the proper value on their natural or cultural resources, on songs or place names associated with a particular location or landform, or on an individual resource and its role in the ecological processes that comprise the web of life

Mapping and Assessing Connections

Dependency webs are relational descriptions or influence diagrams composed of the resources, uses, functions, and services at specific locations

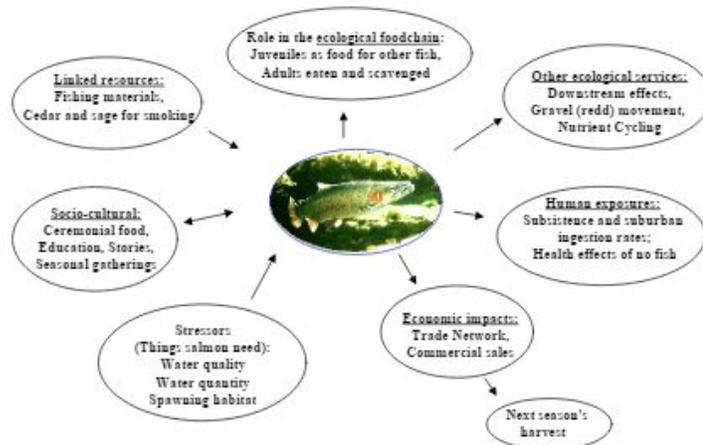


Fig. 1: A Salmon Dependency Web. This is a resource-based dependency web showing one key eco-cultural resource.

¹ “Environmental Justice in Indian Country: Using Equity Assessments to Evaluate Impacts to Trust Resources, Watersheds and Eco-cultural Landscapes” Harris, S and Harper, B. Presented at *Environmental Justice: Strengthening the Bridge Between Tribal Governments and Indigenous Communities, Economic Development and Sustainable Communities*” Conference sponsored by EPA and Medical University of South Carolina, June 11, 1999.

where contamination and impacts are likely to occur. The webs are intended to describe what is 'at risk' and what is at stake if different locations become contaminated.²

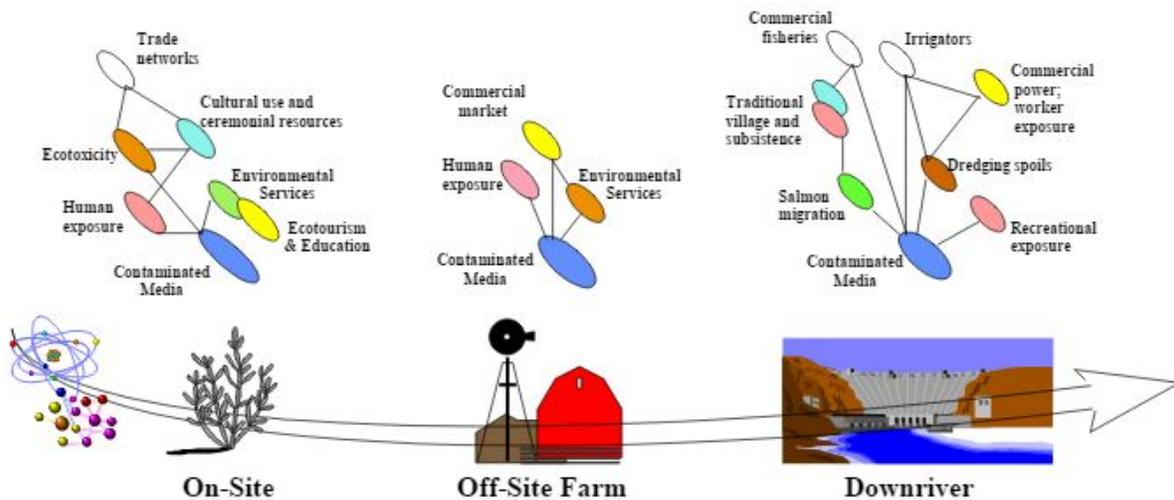


Fig. 2: Dependency Resource/Use Webs. As contamination moves through different areas, different resources are affected, different impacts happen, and different people will be concerned. Dependency webs help tell the whole story about what will happen if different locations are contaminated, and provide a way to organize the metrics that will be included in the risk analysis.

A healthy ethno-habitat or eco-cultural system is one that supports its natural plant and animal communities and also sustains the biophysical and spiritual health of its native peoples. These are living systems that serve to help sustain modern Native American peoples' way of life, cultural integrity, social cohesion, and socio-economic well-being. Larger ethno-habitats can include multiple interconnected watersheds, discrete geographies, seasonal use areas, and access corridors.

Three or four components to the risk assessment process: human health (using appropriate exposure scenarios), ecological health, and socio-cultural/socio-economic health, all of which are elements of the overall eco-cultural system.

Risk is the product of both exposure and sensitivity, pre-existing stressors or co-risk factors should be identified for each type of effect.

Risk assessments should be undertaken not only protect current subsistence and cultural practices, but also promote and enhance the restoration of those tribal practices and values that are protected by treaties between tribes and the United States.

² "Using Eco-Cultural Dependency Webs in Risk Assessment and Characterization of Risks to Tribal Health and Culture" Harris, S and Harper, B. *Environ. Sci & Pollut. Res.* Special Issue 2 (2000)



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