

Environmental Health in the Pacific Northwest

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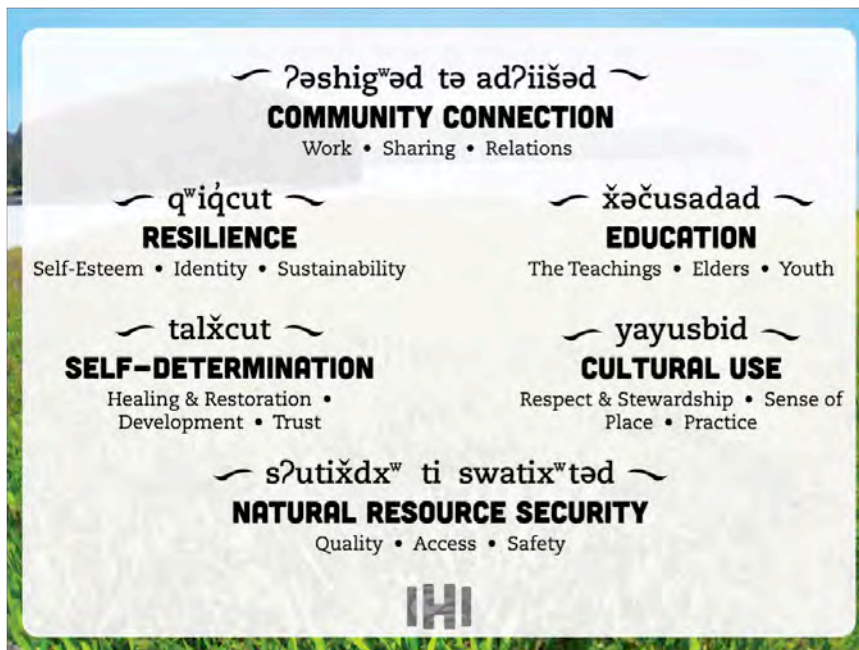
The Swinomish Indian Tribal Community is a federally recognized Indian Tribe that resides on the Puget Sound in Washington State. The community consists of Coastal Salish peoples who are descended from groups and bands originating from the Skagit and Samish River Valleys, coastal areas surrounding nearby bays and waters, and several islands including: Fidalgo, Camano, Whidbey, and the San Juan Islands (Swinomish.org). There are approximately 900 tribal members with the majority residing on the Swinomish Reservation or in nearby Skagit County.

Cultural competency is a term used in academia when scientists seek to engage in research with indigenous communities.



Larry Campbell leading one of the community meetings (Courtesy of Jamie Donatuto).

Since there has yet to be a model that truly captures the full meanings of health for indigenous communities, Larry Campbell and Jamie Donatuto, sought to develop one that demonstrates the connection to land and how it creates and carries forward a community as individuals and as



Indigenous Health Indicators model developed by Larry Campbell and Jamie Donatuto (Courtesy of Jamie Donatuto).

a whole. Larry, an enrolled member of the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community, and Jamie, the Environmental Health Analyst for the tribe, took many concepts into consideration when they developed their Indigenous Health Indicator (IHI) model.

Campbell and Donatuto realized the shortcomings of current health assessment models,

including their lack of prioritizing needs accurately, dealing with intangible items, and methods that do not equitably evaluate aspects of health. Additionally, human health risk assessments are very narrow in focus and concentrate on the individual, cancer and non-cancer endpoints, after the fact responses, but nothing that truly represented how a community can improve their culture, tradition, and environment. Health indicators should represent positive aspects of health and a beginning point to help develop research questions to enhance traditional ways to be healthier as a people.

In order to develop a model that would serve the best interests of the community, Campbell and Donatuto used the question raised by tribal council as to how conventional health models related to their community to begin developing the Indigenous Health Indicators model. To tackle this issue, Larry and Jamie interviewed 100 tribal members in order to gain more insight as to the meanings and priorities of health from a Swinomish point of view. The interviews dug into what health means to the community, the physiological side, the connection to the environment, how reciprocity is incorporated, and how the health of the community is defined on a familial and community

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scale rather than solely the individual. This information allowed Campbell and Donatuto to develop the IHI model that would be used in parallel with other models for community assessment.

As one of the tribal members involved in the interviews, Larry found it helpful to incorporate the Swinomish traditional lifestyle into the health of its tribal members. “Describing how various ceremonies and laws govern the fishermen, the hunters, how generosity is exhibited by these individuals by sharing their first catch with the elders who cannot go out and hunt on their own. These traditions are done for good luck and for good luck with hunting. The traditional foods of the Swinomish have a deep spiritual meaning and provide food for the spirit. At each gathering, traditional foods are always made



The Salmon Dancer Canoe Family paddles along the shorelines of Swinomish. (Photograph by Ann Smock)

available to the people with salmon being the central part. It is these concepts that greater society does not understand or realize how they relate to the overall health of the community and their environment.”

After the interviews, a series of workshops utilized interactive PowerPoint presentations that allowed stories and meanings to be described using real-time software, with responses available immediately on the screen for discussion. The response software allowed anonymous responses, which would prevent any tensions from building due to the small community size.



Swinomish Indian Tribal Community regional map (Courtesy of Jamie Donatuto)

Larry and Jamie have done similar work in other tribal communities to develop a set of IHI unique to each community. Community members and staff often run the project with input from the two researchers. Their model is tailored to the specific tribe they are working with, and the data



Jamie Donatuto & Larry Campbell. (Courtesy of Jamie Donatuto)

collected is to be used as determined by the tribe, with all information kept by the tribe. Larry and Jamie have worked with tribes across North America, including North Carolina, Alaska, and Canada.