

“Connections with the land: qualitative research on how land-based cultural activities contribute to health and wellness for Indigenous people”

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Preliminary results:

Four Indigenous Elders, each with extensive and diverse experience in leading or facilitating land-based cultural retreats, were interviewed with the goal of learning from their collective wisdom and knowledges. The aim of this qualitative analysis is to distill the collective discourse of these three interviews into distinct, yet interwoven, themes to inform an ongoing research project which aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do land-based cultural retreats promote healing in Indigenous persons with lived HIV, hepatitis C (HCV) or co-infection experience?
2. How can we maximize the effectiveness of land-based cultural retreats in terms of elucidating positive wellness outcomes and healing?
3. How can we integrate land-based research into the praxis/research relationship?

Our analysis of the interview transcripts point to five cross-cutting themes which provide a starting point for the development of a series of impactful and effective land-based cultural retreats as viable interventions to improve the wellness of Indigenous peoples living with HIV and/or HCV.

Theme #1: Land is Medicine

Findings: A central theme across all interviews with the Elders was that land and healing are intertwined. The Elders were unanimous in expressing that, within Indigenous philosophies and worldviews, Mother Earth provides us with all that we need. Within this perspective then, the land, geography and ecosystem are all considered *Medicine*.

The above statement was eloquently explained in the words of one Elder:

“Geography and ecosystem provide medicines; medicines that we need to keep ourselves in balance, physically, intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, sexually. We need those medicines and the ecosystem provides them.”

Moreover, in their discussions, the Elders emphasized that re-connecting Indigenous peoples with land and culture can facilitate transformative experiences, which, in turn, lead to individuals and communities embarking on journeys of self-discovery, healing and wellness.

Connections between land and wellness

In our interviews, Elders discussed that, for many Indigenous peoples, connections with the land – physical, cultural, spiritual and symbolic - are foundational to one’s wellness journey. More specifically, for Indigenous peoples who may have lived experience of a variety of health conditions (such as HIV and/or HCV), promoting

these connections with the land and traditional culture is essential for re-gaining, maintaining and upholding wholistic¹ wellness.

This sentiment was reflected in the following quotes:

*“So to bring people outside is to re-connect. It's, to me, it's, it's the *nuts'a'ma* [we are one]. But it's one with Mother Earth. Mother Earth is [going to] give us what we need.”*

“Because we've stopped listening. And we've got to [listen] - and feel the power of being out in that rural area, back to the way it should be, and to feel the energy coming off, coming right out of Mother Earth - the medicines.”

“And it's easier to sort of, understand, and be grounded, too, back on the land. So...you know, that's one thing I think a lot of our [members], that live in the Downtown Eastside...they were connected at one time and they really thrive on that connection back to the land.”

Land enables a re-connection to culture

Elders further articulated that being on the land facilitates a re-connection to traditional Indigenous culture, teachings and values. Land-based cultural retreats, therefore, can be viewed as conduits toward cultural connection - which is essential for wholistic healing in Indigenous people who are living with HIV and/or HCV.

This was demonstrated by the following quotes:

“Around the cultural part is basically, it, it's a way of teaching, it's a way of a way of...involving people that don't get that opportunity to be involved in the culture.”

“I guess first of all, we were connected by being all women, and then culture and then HIV...We've lost a lot of our culture, our knowing of who we are and how to be who we are. It's a fact that [many of us] don't know our medicines, we don't - because that was taken away from us.”

“And to find other people - everyone there was experiencing that same loss...to have that connection of sharing of little teachings or a lot of teachings that each and every one of us had - it was an experience that you can't put on paper, you can't - it carries in your mind, in your heart, in your spirit.”

Land promotes transformative experiences

Lastly, contained within the theme of “Land is Medicine”, is that cultural activities undertaken within the context of a land-based retreat facilitate transformative experiences in participants. These transformative experiences take many forms, and are unique to each individual participant. However, common among these experiences is that they enable enhanced self-acceptance, positive Indigenous identity and improvements in self-perceived wellness.

We therefore recognize that western, biomedical treatments are “necessary, but not sufficient” in providing comprehensive and wholistic healing for Indigenous persons affected by HIV and/or HCV. In addition to providing physical healing through biomedical therapies, interventions must also take into consideration the mental, emotional and spiritual components of health.

¹ The term “wholistic” (vs. “holistic”) is used here intentionally, as, in many Indigenous teachings, it refers to the “whole being” or “whole person”. Wholistic wellness involves an optimal balance in the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual domains of health.

One Elder discussed how land-based cultural retreats allow participants to temporarily remove themselves from home environments that are often chaotic and stigmatizing. This “unplugging” then, allows them to “take a step back” and focus on their own healing journey:

“The guys could just let their hair down, be themselves and hang out with other [guys].”

“Living in an environment in an urban city, sometimes it gets really difficult to learn that [culture]. You know, you're drawn back into all that...chaotic movement of the city. And, whereas if you go back to the land...you have that time, and you don't have a watch, you're not dealing with cell phones, you're not dealing with all the mechanical stuff.”

Similarly, another Elder discussed how land-based cultural retreats promote self-care:

“Self-care is ceremony. When I hear about self-care, I think it's a funny word. Self-care, take care of yourself, self-wellness. Ceremony. We need to be in constant care of the self.”

Also evident within the interviews was the strong connection between land, ecosystem, culture and healing. To illustrate this, an Elder told the following story about one of their experiences on a land-based retreat:

“[There was] a beautiful cedar tree. Burned...Inside's gone now. So I go over. It's quite tall...I go over ...and I put my hands on the stump. Put my hands, close my eyes, ask to feel...the energy, moving through what appears to me to be a dead [tree]. Wow...what I see is that something dead...When I touched, and I asked...it's there [the energy]. So what does that tell you?” *“*Nuts'a'ma* - we're one. We just need to connect. Medicine. I said, that's medicine.”*

The Elder went on to explain that the goal of land-based retreats is to “lift people up”:

*“For me, [cultural retreats] are always about *saast* - lifting up the heart and the mind...I listen to who my group is, and what they may be going through...it's always about lifting [them] up.”*

Theme #2: Culture is Medicine

Findings: Overwhelmingly, discussions with the Elders focused on how traditional teachings and cultural activities are Medicine. It is this connection to culture promotes physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual healing.

Significance of cultural activities

Cultural activities, such as ceremony, prayer, storytelling and giving thanks to the Creator were highlighted as key cultural activities of land-based cultural retreats. During the interviews, Elders discussed examples of cultural activities conducted on the land, such as song, dance, drumming, beading, crafting, sweat lodge ceremonies, nature walks and medicine gathering.

The following quotes briefly illustrate some examples of cultural activities the Elders considered important:

“Of course, medicine pouches. I've made medicine pouches for around necks, I've done that with the women. And teaching how to make bundles, memories, altars, and using stuff of the land.”

"I go to sweat [sweat lodge] because that's the moment for me to take care of me. If I can't take care of me, I can't take care of anybody else."

"So, I did a [cedar] brushing with the women, and I went down on the dock a bit to give the cedar back to the water to be cleansed and give thanks."

Storytelling and speaking traditional language:

During the interviews, the Elders asserted that storytelling at land-based retreats is used as a tool for teaching, learning and re-connecting participants to culture:

"Who are you? Where do you come from? What did you do? And I talk about what I've learned. Story-telling is so important."

"Storytelling is very important, because what it does is it provides a reinforcement - geography, ecosystem, the beliefs and the values. And that's what's most important. How do we take care of ourselves?"

"There's the stories of the legends, the values and the belief system that you share, through a cultural experience. But you also share the story of the cultural experience, itself. So, that's why you have the participants sharing...and you [also] have the witnesses reporting."

"Story-telling, of course is my thing, the legends, going right back to the beginning... I start off with the story of Turtle Island."

Lastly, speaking traditional language was also highlighted as important for promoting and maintaining cultural ties:

*"You need to introduce words. Aboriginal words from - it doesn't matter where they come from. *Xexe slachen*. Sacred medicine."*

Theme #3: People are medicine

Findings: The collective discourse of the Elder interviews also underscored that, at land-based retreats, the social bonding and nurturing of community among participants leads to healing. In other words – people are Medicine. It was discussed that many participants living with HIV and/or HCV are socially dislocated. Land-based retreats then, provide a culturally safe environment for participants to meaningfully engage, share and learn from Elders, health professionals and peers who have had similar life experiences.

Role and importance of Elders and their teachings

Apparent across all interviews was the sacred and important role that Elders play in guiding participants on their healing journeys - connecting them to land, culture and traditional teachings.

For example, Elders discussed their roles at land-based retreats in terms of listening and bringing participants together cohesively as a group:

"I wasn't really responsible for anything but love...I did opening ceremonies."

"Our Elder...did a drum song in the morning, so that was good. Lots of singing...just, sharing and being with each other and exchanging information."

"[I] meet them where they're at. And just, you know, talk to them. So my role is basically just to listen and to understand."

"I sat back and I watched...who was with who. And...if there was someone by themselves...I would go up and sit and talk to them, or draw...or do something just to include them. And, you know, introduce them to somebody else."

Some Elders discussed their role in terms of promoting culture and traditional teachings:

"You have cultural education, cultural exercises, cultural-spiritual experiences. As the Elder, you nurture that within them and you bring that out of them."

"So the teachings, a lot of times, just come to me when I'm there, you can sort of understand that. I come with my tool kit of rocks, and teachings that my grandfather taught me, but I've noticed at the retreats, that a lot of teachings come back to me, or are given to me when I'm there."

**whee-gus* [sweet grass]...I hear a number of things...for me, It's got one job. That job is to bring your words to your ancestors. As soon as you light it, it's gone. Your words have gone...for others, this medicine has many different uses. But, for me, its job is to send. So when I use [sweetgrass], it's sending the words that I need to send to my ancestors for help."*

"So, the legends... [the] Seven Grandfather Teachings are very important, I use rocks in almost all my teachings, because that's the way I was taught...I do medicine wheels with rocks. I also do [a teaching], where we, if we're carrying something really bad...we put one thing we want to get rid of into a rock, because we know the rock can hold it. And then we let the water cleanse it and take it away."

Finally, providing emotional and cultural support was also discussed as another key role of Elders:

"When I knew something might be tough, or [someone] may be triggered, I would give her [the Elder] a heads up, and say, "Can you just be available?"..."can you just be here because this is a really heavy section?"

Bonding, acceptance and inclusiveness

Many of the Elders expressed how, over the course of a land-based retreat, strong social bonds are formed between the participants, which leads to a sense of community, solidarity and togetherness.

This was illustrated by the following quotes:

"It was a bonding experience that I never thought could be that deep. It was so much sharing and understanding that we are, like, a lost people."

"But it was all good, you know. They all mingled. And there was no judgement. There was no racism. You know...all those pressures of being in a city, that they face. Everybody got along really well."

*"So we're one. *Nuts'a'ma*. One. So as human beings, we're one. But we are also one...with the geography that we're in, because human beings come from all over the world, we're one with Mother Earth wherever we are."*

"We had lots of campfires. And people really were tuned into the campfires, because where can you do that in the city, right? Story-telling, you know, some drumming...just...bonding. It was, it was good. I mean, I haven't felt that good, myself, for a long time, sitting around the campfire."

Theme #4: Research as healing

Findings: A prevailing theme throughout the Elder interviews was that any research conducted within the context of a land-based cultural retreat must lead to healing. To the Elders, research activities and healing were seen as inseparable from each other. Additionally, the Elders stressed that all research must be done "in a good way"². Thus, research at the retreat must integrate Indigenous research methodologies, traditional protocols and research approaches that utilize elements of the land to tell stories, share experiences and gain knowledge. The importance of having an optimal balance between research activities and cultural/wellness activities at land-based retreats was also conveyed.

In the words of one of the Elders:

"Land-based healing is land-based research...The healing has always been there...and I don't like the word 'research' - but we've had to discover it. We've had to embrace it. Now, we're researching it, to see what we've known all along. That it is healing. That it is part of our way of life. It's part of our journey and to be a whole person on this journey."

Sharing circles as tools for research and healing

Some of the Elders discussed the power of sharing circles as tools for both learning about the experiences of participants (the research) and for providing teachings focused on culture and wellness (the healing).

"We had opening circle, where you could choose to smudge or not...the teachings [I gave] were why we smudge and why we do things in a good way."

"People [in the sharing circles] told stories. And...talked about their background, their history, where they came from...there was a couple times where it got a little bit heavy-duty. But...that's part of it, right? Letting go - not carrying that on your shoulders for the rest of your life."

"The diversity...go take that whole power and...and...share it. You ask people, "What have you got to share? What would you like to share?" You know...and they'll share. And that's basically part of learning, right? That's what we call knowledge exchange, knowledge transfer."

"I would do the circle and explore what everybody has to say...about where they're at. Let them go away, and then...try to [summarize] those findings, what they shared within...their group. And then bring it back to the [next] circle."

Land-based research

Land-based research was described as a process of using elements of the land and natural world to learn about the participants' experiences, and how the activities and teachings of the land-based retreat has affected them. For example, guided by Elders, retreat participants may be asked to gather different elements of the land (plants,

² For many Indigenous peoples, research done in a "good way" is a sacred endeavour, grounded in respect and traditional wisdom, that leads to the creation of community and contributes to healing.

stones, feathers, etc.) which are then used in land-based art and storytelling exercises. Elders discussed that these exercises show great potential for assisting participants in sharing their thoughts, feelings, stories and experiences related to their lived experiences of HIV and/or HCV.

Qualitative analysis can then be conducted on these exercises to gain insight into how these visual representations are connected to the challenges associated with HIV/HCV (such as stigma and discrimination) as well as how they relate to the resilience, empowerment and self-acceptance of participants, and to their ongoing healing journeys.

The following are quotes detailing one Elder's personal reflections on their experience with land-based research methodology:

"But to find something in nature, that represents who you are, where you come from, your HIV, your...journey or path you're on at that moment, I think is so powerful."

"I think what I did was look at everything in nature and see how it related to me. So, when I saw the mushroom, which somebody else took, because I made the joke, "Oh, ya, mushroom - kept in the dark."

"I look at a fern going many directions...I could look at a tree. And to just sit there and look at it, and I think with that, comes healing. How does that [tree] represent me? Am I strong? do I have great roots? No - I've lost my family. So that really doesn't, you know, so it can bring up stuff so I go look for something else."

"[Holly and its prickles] represented my addiction. And it also represented boundaries...I wouldn't let anybody close to me. And then it also represented good health in a way. But it was still a pain in my arm, because they were still taking bloodwork every three months...And then my shadow from the sun on the ground, it [represented] that HIV's a shadow, of just who I am, it's not defining me. It's in me, it's like a shadow that follows me everywhere I go. That's why I have the shadow in the picture, because HIV will follow wherever I go."

Evaluation and retreat outcomes

During the interviews, Elders discussed many considerations related to elucidating the impact, effectiveness and outcomes of land-based retreats.

One Elder discussed their first-hand experience in hearing from participants' perceptions of the retreat they attended:

"And the guys were saying, "When are you having your next [retreat]? When are you having your next one?" That's a very positive evaluation. People were just happy. They want to go back."

Another Elder described creative and innovative ways in which to gain a sense of what participants "got out of" the retreat they attended:

"I ask the participants...I said, "I just spent an hour with you." - - this gets to the words again. I said, "What did you hear me say?" "Can draw a picture of what you heard, or a word."...What did you learn?" Because hearing and learning's two very different things. So I ask them, "What did you hear? What did you learn?"

"It's a wonderful tool...you can either write something, or you can draw. You provide the participant with the opportunity to draw. And then, if you [the researcher] don't understand the drawing, like..."What, what the hell is that?"...then they can tell you."

"What did hear? what did you learn? on a scale of 1 to 10 [what was your experience], where is it? Because you provide them with the opportunity. And then, at this point, you get to say to one person, or two, to be special witness, so at the end of this time, when your witnesses have provided you with their hearing, their learning, what they've witnessed, the two special witnesses get to say, "this is what I see you as a group do." Ah. Beautiful. And then, that, that's an evaluation. It's not only self-evaluation, it's evaluation by the witnesses."

Theme #5: Core components of land-based cultural retreats

Findings: The last overarching theme which emerged from the Elder interviews was the presence of a set of core components for land-based cultural retreats. Collectively, the Elders highlighted several planning, logistical and activity-related considerations which they believed would maximize the impact, effectiveness, social bonding and wholistic healing of a retreat.

Their recommendations included:

- **Ensuring that the Elders leading the retreat have the right “fit” and “expertise” in terms of assisting participants – this was especially important within the context of HIV/HCV-specific retreats:**

"And that's where, I think, you have to be really, really careful, is knowing, I think just asking, what they [the Elder] would bring to the retreat, and getting that interview process down."

"So as an Elder, you really have to have that open mind. You know... meet [them] where they're at."

"[The Elder] came with such an open mind and heart, and saying, 'I want to do this.'...she had that connection, you can just feel it, right? And then her saying, "I want to learn more. I want to help educate. I love that."

- **Having regular planning meetings with the research team, retreat facilitators and Elders to plan for potential problems:**

"Ok. [we discussed] What...could go wrong? Or, you know, do we have everything that we need? " Be well prepared."

- **Food and nutrition are essential, traditional food from the territory must be prioritized:**

"And you know, we had good food, [it is] really important that you have good food, because it brings people in the Indigenous community, it brings people together. So, once you have a full belly, right, you're able to do what you need to do."

"So, that's what I'd spend part of that on [retreat funds]...nutrition's the big one."

- **Creation of safe spaces:**

"I don't hide my two-spiritedness. And I don't hide my status of being HIV positive, either, right? So, because...it's irrelevant, right? It just doesn't matter. It doesn't make that whole person as I am. And that came out. And that was good, you know."

"That's important. Giving them that ability to learn from each other, and ask questions. Give them, you know, those few hours. I mean, you don't have to out yourself, but most people do, because they feel safe...So I think that's a big component of the retreat."

"Ya, I think so, because it wasn't, you know they wanted to make sure the women had that energy in that time and place that they could share their teachings."

- **Variety and choice of land-based activities:**

"Being out on the water, or fishing, or, or, um, I know we did a lot of craftwork."

"One of the camps...they have archery. They have canoeing. They have sailing. They have...kayaks. They have places where they can do fires. They have places where they can do crafts....you know, choices."

"[What] I really liked, was having those options of hands being busy."

- **Having something tangible for participants to "take away" from the retreat as a reminder of their experience:**

"To me, you need "that hold-on thing", something that takes you back to a time when you're connected, when you've got that good space. And it could be a medicine pouch, it could be a feather, it could be anything, just whatever that take-away...and it's powerful, it's from the land...you started something on a retreat - a closeness, connections - you need to have something that they can hold on to."

"And I'd also provide them with, at the end of the [retreat] with...it's one of the medicines that's least looked at now - - but rocks are medicine. So I'd provide them with a rock."

- **Providing supplies to participants so they create community and express themselves individually and as a group:**

*"I'd provide them with really good pen, a really good journal. I'd also provide them with colours...pencil crayons, you know, if they wanted to draw. And I'd also provide them...with two articles of clothing. One, a hat, with the same symbol on it. And either, a vest or an outercoat, with the same symbol....and when they look at each other, and see each other, it's constant *nuts'a'ma* [we are one]"*

- **Peer-led workshops**

"In the peer one that we did...the application to attend...there was also a section - would you like to run a workshop? The workshop will be this many minutes. You had to give a description."

"Aprons - you could decorate them anyway you wanted, they had stick-on flowers, they had fabulous beads and stuff. And I'm not a good artist, so I put flowers or grass on the bottom, I just had everybody sign it. And it ended up being one of the best workshops because my apron still hangs on my kitchen wall, and every time I look at it, I see the words of wisdom that other people had written on there."

- **Skills-building workshops**

“I taught [how to advocate for themselves with doctors]...they’d built that relationship with talking to the doctor...it’s really important. You need some place to talk about this...on your status...whether it be Hep-C, HIV, co-infected, whatever. Because there are some people that don’t have that place.”

Conclusion:

Discussions with the Elders revealed the immense healing potential of land-based cultural retreats as viable interventions for improving the wellness of Indigenous peoples living with HIV and/or HCV.

Land, culture, people and research are foundational to these retreats, and, most importantly, research must lead to healing. Lastly - embedded within land, culture, people and research - are a set of core considerations for land-based retreats which must be taken into consideration to maximize their potential for promoting connection to culture, transformative experiences and healing.

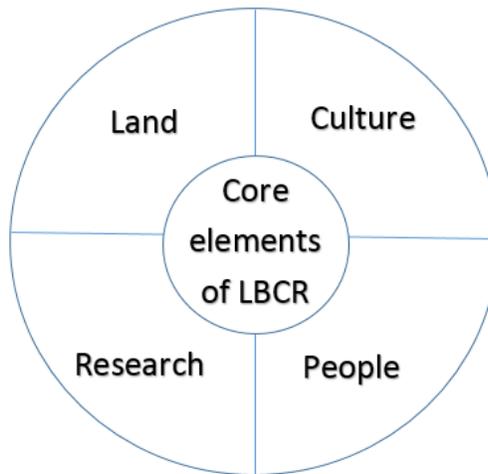


Figure 1: Preliminary Conceptual Framework

Ultimately, it is our goal to integrate the collective wisdom from our interviews into a wise-practices framework for conducting land-based cultural retreats with Indigenous peoples affected by HIV and/or HCV. It is therefore evident that additional in-depth interviews with a variety of different stakeholders (e.g. community health organizations, previous retreat participants and other Elders) will be needed to further crystallize the emergent themes from this analysis so that they can be applied in a way that honours our Indigenous culture and promotes healing of the mind, body and spirit.