

Decolonizing Canada's climate atlas through 'two-eyed seeing'

New initiative adds videos and resources to support Indigenous communities across the country that are confronting climate change.

BY SHARON OOSTHOEK | APR 04 2022

Atlases are political statements – place names, borders, deciding what information to include and what to leave out. But when you create an atlas focused on climate change, and enrich it with Indigenous content, it becomes a deeply political act.

That's exactly what the University of Winnipeg's Prairie Climate Centre has done, in partnership with Indigenous peoples and organizations across the country. Together, they have added [Indigenous knowledges content and data](#) to the centre's interactive Climate Atlas of Canada.

Launched on Mar. 16, the enriched atlas features videos and resources to support Indigenous peoples. That includes impacts and projections of climate change for 634 First Nations and 53 Inuit communities, plus climate adaptation and mitigation strategies across the Métis homeland.

The atlas applies the principles of two-eyed seeing, said Hetxw'ms Gyetxw (also known as Brett Huson), a member of the Gitksan Nation and research associate at the Prairie Climate Centre. "One eye is Indigenous wisdom and the other is Western science. When you do that, you can use both sides as one. We're tokenized still, and this is a way for us to be recognized – that our knowledges are important, and our perspectives are different and important."

The original [Climate Atlas of Canada](#) – launched in 2018 – is an interactive website featuring videos, maps, and plain-language explanations about climate change in communities across the country. Its maps show data for thousands of towns, cities and regions, under both high and low greenhouse gas emissions scenarios. Now that same information is also available for Indigenous communities and regions.

Read also: [Climate atlas combines science with storytelling to address climate change](#)

Facing personal attacks

But if the feedback Hetxw'ms Gyetxw has received since the Indigenous material's launch is any indication, not everyone is happy with the project. He said the criticism is not so much about the content or the science behind it, but about who he is.

"People are personally messaging me and attacking who I am as an Indigenous person," he said. "I wasn't going to mention that, but I have to because it's going to weigh on me mentally. And I'm not the only one. Every Indigenous person goes through this – people personally attacking you."

The centre's executive director, Ian Mauro, suggested the messages coming to Hetxw'ms Gyetxw reflect a deep unease. "There are a lot of people who didn't want to see this map of Canada published because it gives control

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The atlas has been 20 years in the making, but it took four solid years of working with communities – who own the content and give permission for its use in the atlas – to bring it together. That involved treating two-eyed seeing as a methodology, and treating trust as a methodology, said Dr. Mauro.

“You don’t develop these kinds of tools without incredible trust-building,” he said. “We talk a lot about universities working in a reciprocal and respectful way with communities. But to see it in practice and to see the benefit come to communities and the pride of the researchers, it’s just so humbling for a Western-trained, white academic.”

‘We are not just victims’

Inuk climate advocate and Nobel Peace Prize nominee Siila Watt-Cloutier was part of the atlas’s visioning meeting at the University of Winnipeg on Mar. 16, she praised the process for creating something that delivers true empowerment to Indigenous communities.

“We are not just victims of climate change, but teachers of how we can work together on climate issues. So I’m excited about this project,” she said. “The world doesn’t know the brilliance and ingenuity of Indigenous knowledge and could benefit from tapping into it.”

For example, in the Inuit section of the atlas, Ms. [Watt-Cloutier explains the word “sila”](#) and its importance in shaping Inuit understanding of the environment. In the Métis section, [wildland firefighters provide insight](#) into traditional Indigenous practices of fire management.

Meanwhile in the First Nations section, the atlas features the [Onissey Ati Initiative on Climate Change](#). Led by

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“It went through a series of peer reviews. People didn’t know how to handle it. Essentially what that paper shows is that climate change is a symptom,” said Dr. Mauro. “The cause is the human condition and the colonial instinct to control, to be greedy, to take more than you need. As the late Elder Courchene said, ‘To solve climate change, we need to change the human heart.’”

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