



# Reflecting on the First Nations needs assessment



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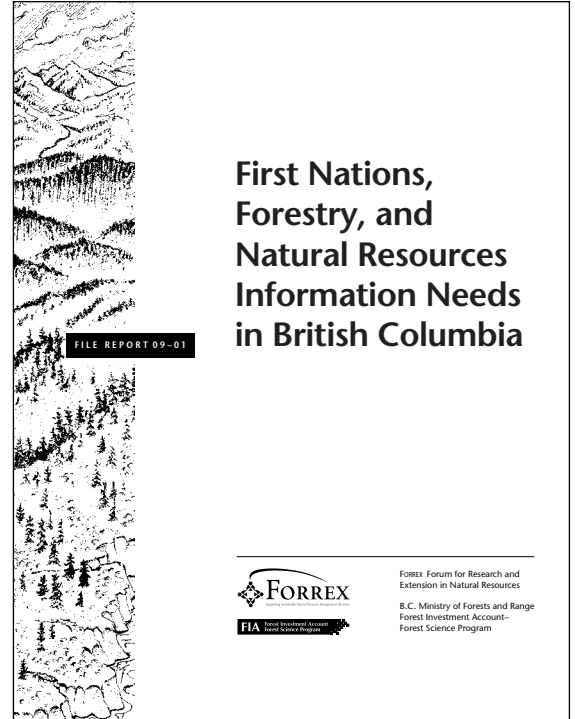
First Nations peoples play a vital role in managing natural resources in British Columbia (BC). Like all resource managers, they require access to relevant and timely science, Indigenous knowledge, and other expert information to inform their participation in resource management planning and decision-making processes. However, First Nations natural resource co-ordinators often lack the access to information, necessary staff, and other resources to meaningfully inform their natural resource management process.

The Forest Investment Account–Forest Science Program’s (FIA–FSP) First Nations Advisory Group (FNAG) requested that FORREX conduct a needs assessment around this question. This assessment was to focus on the natural resource information and knowledge needs of the communities themselves, and identify factors that may limit their participation in natural resource management.

In March 2009, the assessment was co-ordinated by **Ajit Krishnaswamy** and the Aboriginal Forestry and Indigenous Science Cluster extension team. **Georgina Thomas, Larry Joseph, and Ellen Simmons** conducted interviews with people from First Nations organizations who are involved in managing natural resources. The interviews were semi-structured, but most of them turned into free-flowing conversations, which provided valuable insights to the Extension Team.

The results of the assessment were compiled and a technical report has been published. While the report summarizes the qualitative and quantitative interview results, there was no place in it to reflect and discuss the richness of dialogue that occurred during the assessment. In this article, the aboriginal extension team will share some of that dialogue, thoughts about what they heard, and how much they learned about the process of collecting complex information.

First Nations were managing natural resources long before the term “Natural Resource Management” was coined. For most of BC’s written history, First Nations were left out of the planning and decision-making processes that affected their lands. As one of the interviewees pointed out, “We feel we have no authority to make any land-based decisions.”



Slow, and often painful steps have been made to include First Nations in these processes, but most First Nations are far from satisfied with their levels of inclusion in managing their lands and resources. In addition, some First Nations are either unable to participate (As one interviewee stated: “There is no one in our band with natural resource training.”) or unwilling to participate in current land management processes for a variety of reasons. These reasons may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Disagreement with current government policies
- Distrust of governments in general
- Suspicion of industry and their motives
- Lack of capacity and staffing
- Overwhelming social problems (including poverty, high suicide rates, substance abuse, high school dropout rates, and birth and mortality rates)

One Aboriginal Forestry Extension Specialist noted, “It’s hard to take time to look at a stack of referrals or meet with yet another company that wants to cut down your trees when you had three teenage suicides on the weekend and are worrying about getting food for families that don’t have enough to eat.”

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# Extension team enjoyed dialogue with interviewees

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As an extension team, we learned many things about the process used to collect data for this assessment. While many use the internet to conduct business and share information on a daily basis, many in the First Nations communities we contacted are so overwhelmed with email and paper documentation that they did not respond to our initial email. We found that interviewees were more willing to take the time to talk to us when we personally called and arranged a time. We also learned that timing is essential. March is year-end for many groups and, therefore, many potential interviewees did not have the time to participate in the assessment.

The team enjoyed the dialogue with the interviewees who participated in this assessment and learned much in the process. It is our hope that this experience contributes to a deeper and more meaningful relationship between FORREX's Aboriginal Forestry Extension Specialists, the BC First Nations Forestry Council, and First Nation lands and resource officials in the future to provide valuable resource management information to BC First

Nations communities, government officials, and consultants.

To read the full report, please go to **<http://www.forrex.org/publications/other/FileReports/fr09-01.pdf>**

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