



[Vol. 21, No. 1 \(April 1993\)](#)

The Knowledge Path from Cree to Mapuche

by Neale MacMillan

"Our brothers of Canada have spoken of things that for us the Mapuche are in common. They have spoken of the creator, the family, our ancestors, women, men, children, of the mother, the earth, fire, the living beings -- of water as an element that accompanies man whether it be clean or, as it is today, contaminated."

-- Jose Rain, Chief of the Chol-Chol Mapuche in Chile, speaking at the IDRC symposium "First Nations Adopt Southern Technologies for Health," in Ottawa, November 1992.

The Canadian brothers of Chief Rain are the Cree People of the Split Lake Band in northern Manitoba. The two indigenous peoples, supported by IDRC, are embarking on a unique form of technology transfer. The Mapuche will be trained to use simple tests for monitoring the safety of drinking water systems. But the trainers are the Split Lake Cree rather than non-native technicians. The project could help transform today's unsafe water into tomorrow's clean lifeforce. Moreover, it could spell a promising new channel for technology transfer between aboriginal peoples.

The Split Lake community and IDRC have [already collaborated successfully](#) in a three-year project that showed how native people can train themselves in simple water-quality testing to ensure the safety of their water. The technical knowledge passed from specialists in microbiological water-quality testing to Band members in the community. The technology for these tests was developed by a network of scientists in developing countries, supported by IDRC.

Now, the question is whether the technology transfer can occur between two sets of indigenous peoples, says the IDRC's Dr Gilles Forget. "How far can it be translated before something is lost in the translation?" asks Dr Forget.

REACHING OTHER COMMUNITIES

Dr Forget says he was pleased when the Split Lake Cree and their project consultants thought of reaching out to other aboriginal communities. They suggested that many native communities in the Americas were as isolated as themselves, says Dr Forget. "Their problems may be different, but they still don't have this water-quality testing. They don't know whether the water they are drinking is safe." The technology transfer in Chile will involve two Mapuche communities whose living conditions differ markedly. The Maquehue Mapuche live near the city of Temuco (some 650 kilometres south of Santiago) in Chile's ninth region. Their water is drawn by hand pump from wells, stored in elevated tanks and can be distributed to households. The community also has limited access to electricity. The Chol-Chol Mapuche, on the other hand, are many hours from Temuco and quite isolated. Their water comes directly from rivers and springs. According to Dr Forget, people there are sure their water is bringing them sickness. "They notice it changes to a murky colour at certain times of the year."

A Chilean non-governmental organization that works with the Mapuche people, Trafkin, will administer the project funds. It will set up a laboratory in Temuco to prepare media from which to grow bacterial cultures found in the water samples. Later, a laboratory may be set up in Maquehue.

COUNTERPART TRAINING

In the fall of 1993, Chief Norman Flett and his community's water-quality technicians, Alana and Douglas Kitchekeesik, will travel from Split Lake to Chile. The Kitchekeesiks are studying Spanish in preparation, but will also use the services of interpreters. The Cree technicians will spend about a month teaching the Mapuche technicians-in-training the necessary steps in running a water-testing program.

The project has technical backup from the water company in the region, and from Dr Gabriela Castillo of the University of Santiago. (She is a researcher in IDRC's developing-country network on water-quality testing.) Dr Castillo in turn can call upon the expertise of Dr Bernard Dutka of Canada's National Water Resources Institute. Dr Dutka, along with Mr Peter Seidl of the International Joint Commission for the Great Lakes, is overseeing a secondary component of the project. It will investigate the presence of toxins in water sources in the Mapuche communities.

Apart from the technical aspects of the project, the Cree and Mapuche Peoples plan to become better versed in each other's culture. They will also have a chance to compare notes on native self-government: this is an area where Canada's Cree People already have some experience, but it is a relatively new direction for the Mapuche in Chile, according to Dr Forget. The project will end with a week-long workshop reviewing the experience.

If the Cree-Mapuche technology transfer meets expectations, Dr Forget says that IDRC foresees establishing links with other indigenous nations to promote useful technologies. For his part, Mapuche Chief Jose Rain already assumes that water-quality testing will be successfully introduced to his community. "My hope is to teach it to other indigenous people," he says.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

Doctora Gabriela Castillo
Universidad de Chile
Departamento de Ingenieria Civil
Casilla 228-3 Santiago Chile
tel: (562) 94171 fax: (562) 671-2799

SEE ALSO:

[Indigenous Peoples Test the Waters](#)

Unless otherwise stated, all articles and photos may be freely reproduced providing suitable credit is given.

ISSN 0315-9981. This magazine is listed in the Canadian Magazine Index.

- [Subscription information](#)
- [Return to the IDRC Reports homepage](#)
- [Return to the IDRC homepage](#)

