

Lessons from community-based documentation and management of living resources in North West Greenland

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Monitoring of changes in the environment is necessary to ensure that resources are sustainably used. The scientific knowledge of populations and trends in Greenland's living resources is incomplete. Local knowledge abounds but has rarely been quantified or used for government decision-making.

The Greenland Government would like to a) increase local capacity to quantify, document and manage the living resources, b) enhance local engagement in natural resource management, c) encourage improved ability to adapt management to changes in the populations and distribution of species, and d) strengthen the dialogue between fishers, hunters, scientists and managers.

In response to these challenges, we are testing how community-based documentation and management of living resources can be undertaken in Greenland in practice. We have established a simple, community-based monitoring scheme, led by the Department of Fisheries, Hunting and Agriculture and Qaasuitsup Municipality. The scheme is being implemented by the three villages of Akunnaaq, Qaarsut and Ilulissat.

As part of this scheme, the village committees of the three villages have each established a local Natural Resource Council (NRC). These councils consist of some of the most experienced and interested local hunters, fishers and other people interested in the environment. When members of these councils are in the field, they collect data on the living resources and their usage. At quarterly meetings of each council, data are summarized, discussed, interpreted and possible management initiatives emanating from the results are considered. The proposed management decisions and the supporting data and analysis are forwarded to the Village Committee for its endorsement, before being forwarded to the municipality and government authorities.

The following are examples of how the data are used. First, in Akunnaaq, the NRC recorded trawlers operating in a shallow sea area adjacent to their village. There were 4-5 vessels every day throughout April and May 2010. This number was the same as in 2009 but higher than in previous years. Moreover, the vessels were using heavier fishing gear. The NRC was worried that potential degradation of the seafloor might affect the production of Atlantic Wolf-Fish and so they proposed that the municipality should restrict the size of vessels in the area.

Second, one of the attributes recorded by the NRC in Qaarsut is their catch of Greenland Halibut in the fiord. On the basis of their catch-and-effort estimates from long-line fishery, they assessed that the population was the same in May 2010 but higher in June-September 2010 than in the same months of 2009. Nevertheless, the NRC was concerned that many nets were being set over their longlines and that some nets were left at sea when the sea was covered by ice, given that rotting fish attracts sharks. They proposed that the municipality should restrict net fishing in the area.

Third, in Qaarsut, the Council observed that the population of Canada Goose had increased substantially. Canada Goose may outcompete the threatened Greenland White-fronted Goose. They proposed that the autumn hunting period for Canada Goose should be expanded by two weeks.

As shown above, the principal data managers are the NRCs. The basic raw data comprise field forms, filled in by hand, with observations of species/resource use, quantity, place and time. The municipal office in each village provides a meeting room, stamps, access to photocopying etc. The community members participate as volunteers because of their interest. It is also an opportunity for their insights and knowledge to be used and their voices heard. The scheme can be sustained at very low cost.

Some of the challenges we have recognized are: (i) How can we locally manage populations that are shared between several villages or countries? and (ii) How can we locally make management decisions when there are disagreements within the sector (e.g. local versus foreign fishers)?

In conclusion, community-based documentation cannot replace scientist monitoring of the living resources in Greenland but the two approaches can supplement each other. Local monitoring can, for instance, help pinpoint particular species or areas that are in need of more attention. The municipality is now integrating the scheme into its mainstream activities and scaling it up to more villages. The government is keen on a better differentiation of fishing and hunting periods and quotas geographically within the large country, and we hope that our new scheme can help this process.

By community members and government/NGO facilitators involved in "Opening Doors to Native Knowledge" ("Piniakkanik sumiiffinni nalunaarsuineq"; www.PiSuNa.org)