



Data sharing for Indigenous Peoples engagement: What and how

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Recommended citation: Bacha, R.R.B., 2026. Data sharing for Indigenous Peoples engagement: What and how. In: Geological Fieldwork 2025, British Columbia Ministry of Mining and Critical Minerals, British Columbia Geological Survey Paper 2026-01, pp. 37-43.

Abstract

As a science agency, the British Columbia Geological Survey strives to be an unbiased broker of information and to build trust and facilitate knowledge exchange with Indigenous Peoples through its Engagement Program. Recognizing the value of better understanding the mineral endowment of their traditional territories for self-determination and decision making, interest in the geosciences from Indigenous communities and leadership has grown. However, several obstacles can impede geoscience information being immediately received, understood, and incorporated into decision-making processes. To ensure that Indigenous Nations can access, absorb, and use geoscience information, the Survey is moving away from the historic deficit model of communication where one-way statements from the researcher to the public prevail. Instead, since 2023 the Survey has adopted, and is working to apply, dialogue and participatory models rooted in mutual respect and collaboration. The Survey addresses initial information barriers by reaching out to Indigenous groups with invitations to participate in knowledge-sharing activities and by preparing compilations highlighting key pieces of information and how the material might be used. If barriers related to the language of geoscience exist, the Survey offers personal consultations, hands-on experiences such as field trips, and makes terminology-filled documents containing foreign concepts more straightforward. Given that Indigenous peoples should be meaningfully engaged in scholarship that concerns them, the Survey works to foster stronger relationships with Indigenous communities as an integral part of new fieldwork programs. Through the BCGS Indigenous Peoples Engagement Policy, new Survey projects undergo multiple engagement sessions before, during, and after studies are carried out. Opportunities exist to use geology as a neutral and constructive entry point into land-use discussions because Traditional Knowledge and Western science intersections can serve as a foundation for dialogue to build a common understanding of the natural and geological history of the province. Geology field trips provide valuable opportunities for Indigenous community members and geoscientists to come together in a powerful but depoliticized setting to build a common understanding of the land, as exemplified by a collaboration between the Citxw Nlaka'pamux Assembly in south-central British Columbia and the Survey.

Keywords: Engagement, data sharing, reconciliation, Indigenous Peoples, Traditional Knowledge, Western science, free prior and informed consent, FPIC

1. Introduction

Through its Engagement Program, which started in 2023, the British Columbia Geological Survey (BCGS) is connecting Indigenous Peoples, local communities, government, the minerals industry, and the public to the geology and mineral resources of the province. This work enhances land-use planning and resource co-management and is particularly important for fostering relationships with Indigenous Peoples. There is growing interest from Indigenous communities and leadership to better understand the mineral endowment of their lands, recognizing the value of this knowledge for self-determination and decision making. As a science agency, the Survey is an unbiased broker of information that serves to build trust and facilitate knowledge exchange. The Survey is striving to connect with Indigenous groups to raise awareness of research projects on their lands, identify opportunities and challenges, and explore partnerships. However, numerous barriers can impede geoscience information being immediately received, understood, and incorporated into decision-making processes.

This paper details the approach the Survey takes in its Engagement Program, which is rooted in mutual respect, two-way communication, and collaboration. It describes how barriers to effective transfer of existing information and historical data can be overcome, particularly those related to the language of geoscience, illustrates the practices the Survey currently uses when conducting new research programs, underscores how a common understanding of the natural history and geological resources in the province can be attained by sharing Traditional Knowledge and Western science, and concludes with an engagement example in which the Citxw Nlaka'pamux Assembly of south-central British Columbia and the Survey successfully co-designed a short course and field trip.

2. The approach

To ensure that Indigenous Nations can access, absorb, and use geoscience information, the Survey has moved away from the historic 'deficit' model of communication (see review by Onstad and van der Flier-Keller, 2025) where one-way communication from the researcher to the public prevails. Instead, the Survey has adopted dialogue and participatory models. The dialogue

model entails two-way communication in which scientists and Indigenous groups communicate early and often to co-produce knowledge by being connected throughout the process (Onstad and van der Flier-Keller, 2025). Participatory models take advantage of fieldwork being inherent to geoscience research, which provides opportunities for first-hand experiences of Western science and Traditional Knowledge. The premise of this process is that research involving Indigenous communities is based on respectful relationships with intensive collaboration and participation.

Establishing partnerships with Indigenous Nations to conduct research might be seen as an obstacle for some researchers. Nonetheless, proper engagement is beneficial to all parties, especially when appropriate engagement mechanisms are in place (Bharadwaj, 2014). Charlene George, artist and band member of the T'Sou-Ke Nation (T'Sou-Ke is the name of the Stickleback fish that lives in the estuary of the Sooke River), says parties should be willing to listen in a different way and work around their differences (pers. comm., August 20, 2024).

The S'tenistoww Conference that was held at Camosun College in 2024 had a particular focus on advances in the field of Indigenous education. Conference Elder Graham Hingangaroa Smith reflected on the metaphor of 'where the waters meet'. He underscored that understanding water not as a divider but as a connector is consistent with the way many Pacific peoples find their knowledge. Applying this metaphor to the geosciences, active data sharing should be seen as one more stream of water connecting and increasing existing channels of knowledge.

Also at the 2024 S'tenistoww Conference, Copper Joe Jack described the importance of respectful interactions and data sovereignty and laid out some rules of engagement (Fig. 1). To paraphrase Jack's words, consent-based decision-making tools using traditional ways and Western knowledge should be based on three key principles: respect, caring, and sharing. When used in combination, these rules form a sacred space to bring and rebuild healthy relationships between peoples and lands.

Respecting different worldviews but with same objectives can support positive transformations. Alongside these rules, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous

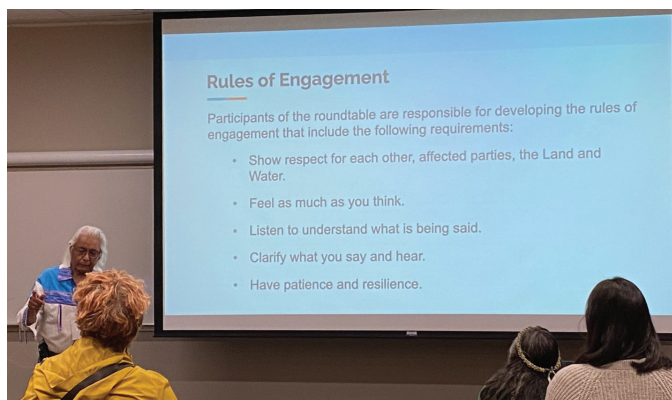


Fig. 1. Copper Joe Jack presenting the Land and People's Relationship model at the S'tenistoww Conference in Victoria, 2024.

Peoples (UNDRIP) requires states to consult and cooperate with Indigenous Peoples through free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) before adopting measures that may affect them. In this context, consultation and participation of Indigenous Peoples before developments must be free of coercion, intimidation, or manipulation, must initiate well before any authorization or commencement of activities, and proponents must provide enough information to address a range of aspects such as nature, size, pace, reversibility, scope, duration, locality, and affected areas of any project or activity. It must also include assessments of the likely economic, cultural, social, and environmental impacts of proposed projects, and finally, the consent.

Using work such as by Berger (1977) and Booth and Skelton (2011) for guidance, we aspire to work proactively to find mutually acceptable resolutions to Indigenous concerns and giving priority to appreciating perspectives and needs, understanding apprehensions, building positive and respectful community-government relationships, enhancing mutual education, fixing procedural issues, and respecting existing rights.

Although technology now enables us to communicate in real time across the entire planet, there is an enormous difference between remote and in-person interactions. Geoscientists are motivated by a keen desire to investigate how the Earth formed and the changes it has seen through time. So, spending time in Indigenous communities to share neutral information and ideas is an important part of the Engagement Program, as modelled after the internationally recognized benchmark of engagement carried out in the 1970s by Justice Thomas Berger (Berger, 1977) as part of the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry. Only by visiting Indigenous communities and listening to how individuals understand their land and paying attention to their concerns about how mineral exploration and development can impact the land and waters can one learn about how people have lived and hunted for thousands of years, understand their connection to the land, and be in a position to conduct meaningful dialogue and communicate neutral information in a non-politicized context. Rather than geoscientists merely providing one-way information sessions about the work they do, community visits, including field trips, encourage a free interchange of ideas, thus serving to enhance intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect.

3. Existing information and historical data

The BCGS is the custodian of all public provincial geoscience data. Between 1874 and 2025, the Survey has released about 6,000 publications, including Papers, Open Files, GeoFiles, Geoscience Maps, Information Circulars, Digital Geoscience Data, Bulletins, Land Use Maps, and Annual Reports (British Columbia Geological Survey, 2026). Survey staff also have a long history of publishing about provincial geoscience in the national and international peer-reviewed literature. The Geological Survey of Canada (the federal geoscience agency) also has a long history of working in the province, publishing internally and externally, and universities such as Simon Fraser

University, University of British Columbia, University of Victoria, Queen's University, and McGill University conduct research that is commonly released in the form of graduate student theses. However, most of the Nations contacted at the start of the Engagement Program were unaware that such a vast assortment of materials was available to them. Furthermore, it can be a daunting task for those unfamiliar with the BCGS publication catalogue, journal catalogues, or research activities at universities to simply access materials then understand how and why studies were done, establish which ones are relevant, and then determine how they might be used.

The Engagement Geologist now addresses these barriers by a reaching out to Indigenous groups with invitations to participate in knowledge sharing activities and by preparing compilations highlighting the most important pieces of information with explanations of how the material might be used in their decision-making processes.

4. The language of geoscience

Like most specialized disciplines, geoscience has its own language. For example, the current Glossary of Geology published by the American Geological Institute (Neuendorf et al., 2005) is almost 800 pages long; many of the terms are arcane and obscure or have different meanings in simple English. Most of the geoscience literature is written using this technical language and most contain concepts that are likely to be foreign to many readers. Thus, anyone without significant training can easily be intimidated when confronted with deciphering the significance of a given publication. To overcome this barrier and ensure that Indigenous groups can fully absorb and then use the information contained in geoscience reports, the Engagement Geologist takes three approaches. First, they serve as a dedicated a point of contact who can be called upon to discuss technical aspects. Second, they prepare short courses, hands-on workshops and, most importantly, field trips where individuals can be active participants and gain first-hand geoscience experience to better understand written documents. Third, they prepare summaries that render terminology-filled documents containing foreign concepts into language that can be readily understood by anyone without losing the meaning of the original.

Creating easily understandable products from recent mineral potential modelling work is an example. The Survey is meeting a heightened demand for geoscience information needed to guide land-use decisions and co-management of mineral resources by increased delivery of Mineral Lands Assessment reports that evaluate the significance of mineral resources in an area and the likelihood of mineral exploration and mining continuing in the future. These reports are aided by new mineral potential modelling, which the Survey revitalized after a period of relative inactivity lasting about 30 years (Wearmouth et al., 2024a, b). Mineral potential modelling is a tool that supports informed land-use decisions by integrating current geological knowledge of mineral systems with data such as geological maps, geophysical and geochemical surveys, and

known mineral occurrences to identify areas more likely and less likely to have mineral resource potential. Developments in programming languages and exponential increases in computing power have led to significant advances in applying geographic information system (GIS) platforms and using computerized statistical methods to model mineral potential and create maps that portray the relative ranking of mineral potential. However, these maps can easily be misunderstood because they have inherent uncertainties and limitations. So, in addition to highly technical documents, which detail how the maps are created and the statistical methods used (Wearmouth et al., 2024a, b), the Survey has created more accessible Informational Circulars (British Columbia Geological Survey 2025a, b, c, d) that explain the limitations of the maps and how they can be best used.

5. New projects

British Columbia Geological Survey field geologists typically undertake their research by living and traveling on the lands of Indigenous Peoples. Given that Indigenous Nations must be meaningfully engaged in scholarship that concerns them and may be relied upon for decision making (e.g., Smylie et al., 2020), the Survey works to foster stronger relationships with Indigenous communities as an integral part of fieldwork programs. Influenced strongly by the work of Bharadwaj (2014), who described how past health research projects were too often carried out with little or no community interaction, which led to disenchantment in the communities, the Survey has taken a collaborative approach in which new projects go through multiple engagement sessions before, during, and after studies on Indigenous lands are carried out. Through its Indigenous Peoples Engagement Policy, which was created with input from various Indigenous groups, the Survey adopts a predictable path for engaging with Indigenous communities and leadership in areas where a project is proposed (Fig. 2). The Engagement Geologist gathers all the project information and prepares a package that is then submitted to the Indigenous group of concern. If needed, meetings are scheduled to discuss the project and data sovereignty and implement accommodations. After the project is concluded, the Engagement Geologist continues to be available to share the results of a project and address questions. Because of the time required to adequately engage with all affected rights holders, the cycle (Fig. 2) may take longer than a year to complete.

During the normal course of conducting fieldwork, BCGS geologists may inadvertently encounter sites of Indigenous historical value. Recognizing that respect for the history of First Nations preserved at archeological sites is an essential part of reconciliation efforts, the BCGS has introduced a protocol that Survey personnel must follow when finding unreported archaeological materials, commonly referred to as 'chance finds', that emphasizes informing local Indigenous communities of finds. The primary BCGS goal is not to search for but to document and report inadvertently found previously undiscovered cultural sites to help preserve Indigenous heritage.

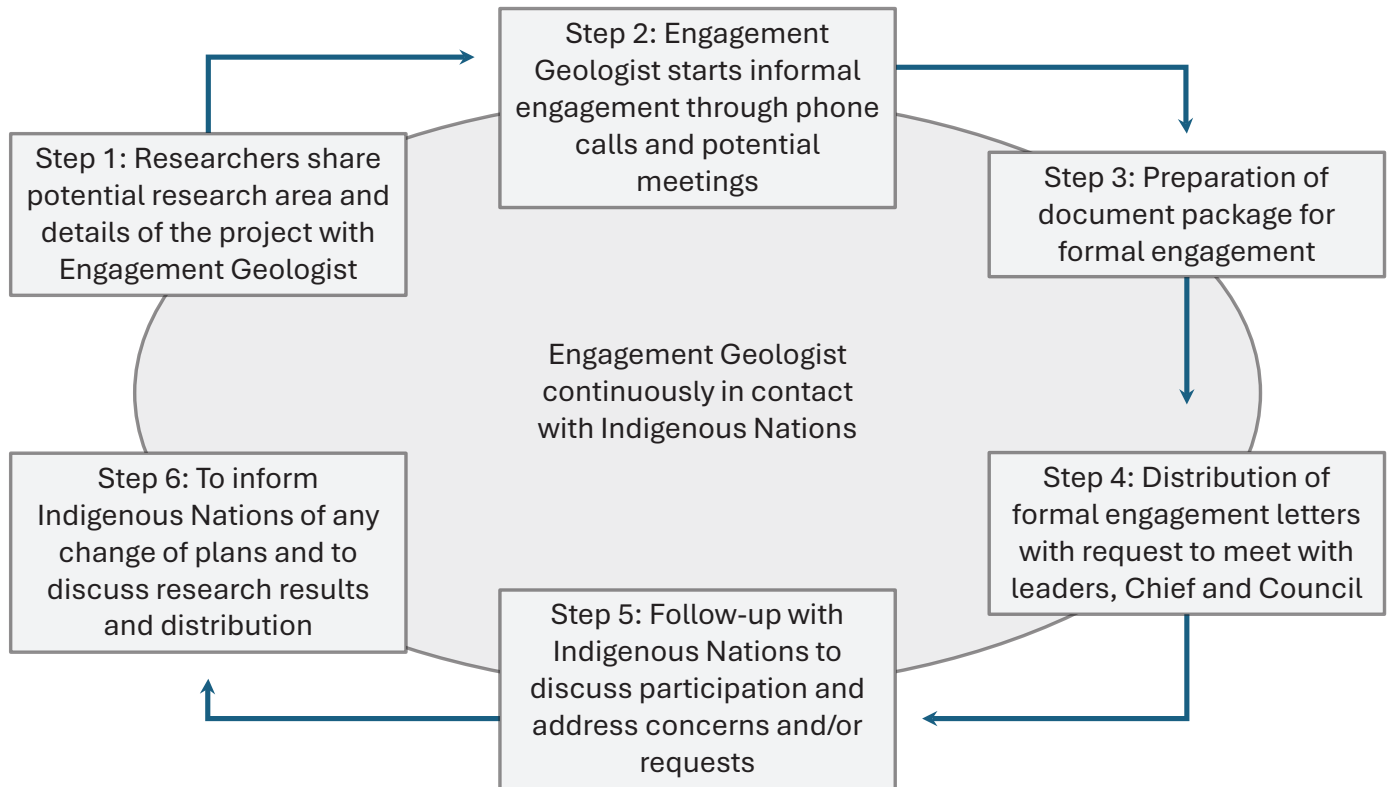


Fig. 2. Diagram depicting engagement workflow cycle for BCGS projects.

6. Traditional Knowledge and Western science

Traditional Knowledge, which is acquired from living on the land and passed down from generation to generation, and Western science are not mutually exclusive and "... with good will and open-mindedness, can complement one another." (White, 2006, p. 401). By adopting a 'two eyes one vision' (Urquhart, 2001) or 'two-eyed seeing' (e.g., Bartlett et al., 2012) approach, which integrates Indigenous perspectives and Western science in our understanding of how the land has evolved, both researchers and traditional knowledge keepers can learn from each other in meaningful ways. This integration has been important in fields such as wildlife management and conservation, land management, and biodiversity (Moller et al., 2004; Schuster et al., 2019; O'Bryan et al., 2020) and public health (Bharadwaj, 2014; Tonkin et al., 2018; Tagalik, 2009; Smylie et al., 2020; Caron et al., 2023).

In the geosciences, Fidler (2010) showed the value of having Indigenous perspectives of mine development incorporated into environmental assessments at the Galore Creek project in northwestern British Columbia, and Allard and Curran (2023) described how Indigenous-led assessments can influence the mine permitting system in the province. Traditional Knowledge with a rich tradition of storytelling and artwork has been of particular importance in documenting historical seismic and tsunami events related to the Cascadia subduction zone along the west coast of North America on Vancouver Island and in Washington State, Oregon, and northern California. Ludwin et al. (2005) and McAdoo et al. (2008) demonstrated that traditional

knowledge saved lives during the 2007 Solomon Islands tsunami.

For engagement by the BCGS, opportunities exist in using geology as a neutral and constructive entry point in land-use discussions because Traditional Knowledge and Western science intersections can serve as a foundation for dialogue to build a common understanding of the natural history and geological resources in the province.

7. A positive example: Citxw Nlaka'pamux Assembly (CNA) field trip and geology short course

The simple joy of being on the land is something that most geologists and Indigenous Peoples have in common. Furthermore, learning from first-hand experience or 'learning by doing' is generally accepted as the key to fully absorbing abstract concepts discussed in a classroom setting. Thus, geological field trips provide valuable opportunities for Indigenous Peoples and geoscientists to come together in the setting they prefer to build a common understanding of natural history and mineral resources. In addition, Tonkin et al. (2018) have shown that community activities such as field trips are appreciated by Elders because they provide opportunities in which cultural knowledge and traditional teachings can be passed on to youth. Furthermore, Onstad and van der Flier-Keller (2025) have documented a marked deficiency in participatory activities for geoscience communication in British Columbia.

In a recent field trip with the Citxw Nlaka'pamux Assembly (CNA), parties shared stories, knowledge, worldviews, and concerns such as abandoned mines. The CNA represents eight participating groups: Ashcroft Indian Band, Boston Bar First Nation, Cook's Ferry Indian Band, Coldwater Indian Band, Shackan Indian Band, Siska Indian Band, Nooaitch Indian Band, and Nicomen Indian Band. Within CNA, the Territorial Stewardship Department work is "rooted in ensuring nle?képmx people have a say in decisions that matter for our people, in accordance with our values and knowledge. Together we will determine how to protect our culture and care for our lands, water, fish, and wildlife" (Citxw Nlaka'pamux Assembly, 2026).

The interaction between BCGS and CNA initiated in June 2024 when representatives from the Territorial Stewardship Department contacted BCGS to request more information about mineral exploration and mining cycles. Following several months of meetings and discussions, both parties agreed that it would be beneficial to co-develop a geology short course and a field trip for CNA staff, which took place in August 2025 near Merritt (Bacha, 2025). CNA participants experienced first-hand how geological research is carried out and visited current exploration sites (MPD project, Kodiak Copper Corp.; New Craigmont project, Nicola Mining Inc.). In exchange, BCGS and industry geologists learned about CNA cultural values, worldviews, and understandings of nature.

Feedback from participants was unanimously positive, both for the short course (Fig. 3; e.g., "amazing, extremely helpful and packed with knowledge... thorough but not overwhelming") and the field trip (Figs. 4, 5; e.g., "I loved the days in the field and getting to see the different outcrops...").



Fig. 4. CNA staff becoming familiar with a Brunton compass.



Fig. 5. Ethan di Marco and Logan di Marco, CNA Land Guardians, investigating an outcrop.



Fig. 3. Classroom geology with CNA staff.

it was really helpful to be in the field and apply what we had learned in class”), and all considered that the activities would help them in performing their jobs.

8. Conclusion

Through its Engagement Program, the Survey works with Indigenous Nations to raise awareness of research projects on their lands, identify opportunities and challenges, and explore partnerships. The program has worked together with about 50 of more than 200 Indigenous Nations in British Columbia through multiple degrees of interactions, from addressing simple requests to accessing information to year-long partnerships with long-term mutually beneficial activities. Core to the Program is that geoscience data are generated in harmonious ways in partnership with Indigenous Nations and that both parties benefit from the production of new geoscience knowledge. Capacity building activities such as short courses and field trips should increase the capacity of Indigenous Nations to the point that they can independently assess and use the data in their decision-making processes.

Acknowledgments

It is an immense honour to work with and write about Indigenous Peoples. The lessons learned come from time spent from 2023 to 2025 with the Carcross/Tagish First Nation, Citxw Nlaka’pamux Assembly, Gitanyow Hereditary Chiefs, K’ómoks First Nation, Nisga’a Nation, Taku River Tlingit First Nation, Tl’azt’en Nation, Tsay Keh Dene Nation, and Tšilhqot’in National Government. I appreciate the critical reviews by Trina Setah from the Xení Gwet’in (Nemiah) community of the Tšilhqot’in National Government (The People of the River), Roger McMillan, and Marc-André Brideau, which substantially improved the quality of this paper.

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