**Peace Athabasca Delta Ecological Monitoring Forum**

November 6-7th, Fort Chipewyan

Prepared by: Monica Kohler and Jolene Swain

November 15, 2012

**Background:**

The Peace Athabasca Ecological Monitoring Program (PADEMP) was initiated in 2008 and is led by Parks Canada. The goal of the program is to develop an integrated ecological monitoring program that can measure, evaluate, and communicate the state of the Peace-Athabasca Delta ecosystem, including any changes resulting from cumulative regional development and climate change.

PADEMP is designed to incorporate both Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and western science-based sources of information. It is guided by a Steering Committee comprised of representatives from:

* Mikisew Cree First Nation, Ft. Chipewyan Metis Association, Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, Salt River First Nation, Smith’s Landing First Nation, Deninu’Kue First Nation, Katl’odeeche First Nation, NWT Metis Nation, Ft Resolution Metis Association, Little Red River Cree Nation
* Parks Canada, Environment Canada, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, Government of Northwest Territories, Alberta Environment and Water

PADEMP’s design will take into consideration the work being undertaken by other relevant monitoring programs in the region. Key monitoring programs identified by PADEMP include: JOSM, community-based monitoring programs run by Mikisew and Athabasca Cree First Nations, ABMI, CEMA, and WBEA. PADEMP identifies communication with these programs as an important and ongoing activity to ensure it doesn’t duplicate sound monitoring efforts. Rather, PADEMP will address areas where key monitoring information is not being collected and will ensure that TEK and traditional use values are incorporated into its monitoring efforts.

In order to foster information sharing, engagement, and collaboration between those conducting monitoring in the Delta and community members, Parks Canada organized a PADEMP Forum in Fort Chipewyan from November 6-7th. Monica Kohler and Jolene Swain represented the ABMI at the Forum.

**Main Outcomes**

The Forum was built largely around break-out groups that focused on three key areas: Water and Fish, Air, and Plants and Animals. There were several re-occurring issues and concerns that were raised by both community members and western scientists throughout the course of the Forum. The Delta is extremely valuable for community members who still rely on plant and animal resources from this area. By far the strongest and most persistently voiced concern was the lack of involvement of community members in the ABMI’s monitoring activities. There is a strong desire from the community members of Fort Chipewyan to be engaged in monitoring programs going on in their area. ABMI activities in the region will not be accepted in a positive manner unless the community becomes more involved. To establish this engagement would require:

* Relationship building between community members and researchers
* Involvement of community members in data collection and access to field sites
* Regular communication with community members not only on monitoring activities but also on the evaluation and results of monitoring data

Communication was identified as one of the key challenges being faced by PADEMP. Local community members rely largely on face to face communication, and many do not own computers or regularly use the internet. Building local relationships; creating a newsletter and other materials to be left at the band office; and using northern radio broadcasts and newspapers were identified as potential methods to communicate with the community members. For the community of Fort Chip, converting information into a tool that the local people can use is a priority. This includes some interpretation or context behind the information. Above all, any communication with community members needs to be in a plain language using simple evaluation and strong visuals.

In addition, common areas of ecological concern were:

* Water levels in the Delta-- water levels are dropping, lakes and channels are drying up and no longer accessible by boat for most of the year. Ice is not freezing like it used to: several layers of ice with air in between are forming due to releases from the Bennett Dam in British Columbia.
* Contaminant levels in the air, water, plants and animals from the oilsands. The biggest question in the community is “Is it safe to eat/drink/breathe?”
* Invasive species (e.g. Canada Thistle, Crow and Magpie, White-tailed Deer) moving into the Delta and pushing back native species, including Berries, Rat-root (Sweetflag), and Wild Mint
* Severe Muskrat declines; state of other fur-bearing species

For all these areas, there is a strong desire among community members to better understand what is driving the changes that are occurring in their traditional lands, and what it means for future land use in the region. They want traditional ecological knowledge to be accessed and followed up on using western science, with the resulting information to be clear, usable and applicable to land management decisions.

**ABMI Context in Fort Chipewyan**

Fort Chipewyan is a remote rural community in northeastern Alberta. It plays a pivotal role in the ABMI’s monitoring in the region, as it is the key base camp for our remote northern crews. Every year, we send multiple crews to Fort Chip and conduct field work in and around traditional lands with almost no notification or involvement of the community members. In recent field seasons, our presence has been identified as an issue by several field crews and Field Supervisors, who have felt at times a sense of disconnect with community members when staying in Fort Chip. There are no nearby alternative communities for ABMI crews to base out of.

**Recommendations**

First Nations and Metis peoples are key stakeholders in Alberta, and they have a strong desire to be involved in monitoring. At this time, the ABMI does not have a strong relationship with the community of Fort Chipewyan, and significant effort is required to begin to build this connection. It is recommended that the ABMI take immediate actions to begin to improve this relationship, and that the ABMI develop a longer term community engagement strategy for Fort Chip. Suggested actions for improved community relations include:

Communication

* Assign an ABMI representative to be in charge of communications and relaying information to the community
* Identify appropriate community representative(s) to support communication of ABMI activities
* Notify the community of ABMI’s activities in advance
* Have Field Supervisors/technicians meet with key community members to keep them updated on ABMI monitoring activity during the field season
* Develop a quarterly newsletter (2 pager) to be posted in key locations to update community members of ABMI activities and results
* Explore existing communication methods being used by other organizations and the possibility for integration

Community Involvement

* Development of short- and long term engagement strategy with Fort Chipewyan to identify benefits, risks, priorities, timelines, and approaches
* Ask for a community member’s assistance for monitoring at ABMI sites in the Fort Chipewyan area
* Invite interested community members to ABMI summer and winter field training, and other future ABMI open house activities
* Hire community members as field technicians
* Incorporate TEK observations into reports for northeastern Alberta

Community Engagement

* Work with the community to develop a community-based monitoring program whereby ABMI captures observational monitoring data from traditional land users
* Collaborate with existing community-based monitoring programs to compare data and present the potential of incorporating some ABMI protocols into their existing studies.
* Take part in Heritage Days on an annual basis
* Enlist support from an advisor on First Nations and Metis affairs
* Consider joining the PADEMP Steering Committee