



Land Use and Occupancy Mapping: A Definition and a Warning

Despite the tremendous diversity among First Nations they all share one thing – the harvesting of fish, wildlife, and plant materials has been the historical basis of economic life. Many aboriginal communities remain dependent on wild mammals, birds, fish, other creatures, and undomesticated plants to feed and shelter themselves. In the pursuit of the resources that continue to be the foundation of their cultures, people leave traces over the landscape, evidence that they have been there. Many of their activities leave no visible evidence, however. Instead, they etch themselves in the minds of those who travel their homeland in search of physical and spiritual sustenance.

First Nation peoples carry maps of their homelands in their heads. For most people, these mental images are embroidered with intricate detail and knowledge, based on the community's oral history and the individual's direct relationship to the traditional territory and its resources. Land use and occupancy mapping is about documenting those aspects of the individual's experience that can be shown on a map. It is about telling the story of a person's life on the land. Over time individual experience becomes part of the collective oral tradition, a story of much grander proportions. In this respect, use and occupancy mapping is a means to help record a nation's oral history.

Mapping is not just about obtaining a set of maps. There are other benefits that arise from the process of obtaining them. When properly done, use and occupancy interviews increase the participants' awareness of their



Elder Peter Hunter and Stan McDonald of the Wolf Lake First Nation take a break during Peter's map biography session in Temiscaming, Quebec. Land use and occupancy projects provide a great opportunity for individuals of different generations to share their experience, information and knowledge.

Land use and occupancy mapping is about telling the story of a person's life on the land.



Elders Felix Tale of the Pehdzeh Ki First Nation and Leo Norwegian of the Liidlii Kue First Nation share stories at the Horn Plateau, Northwest Territories, during a workshop to design a protected area for the plateau. Use and occupancy maps often get used in ways that bring together elders from different villages, which helps keep the bonds between communities strong.

connection to territory. People are usually surprised to see how much they have used their land. They often have a new-found sense that their activities as individuals are part of a larger picture involving the whole community. Mapping always gives rise to a heightened awareness of aboriginal rights that have been denied, and an increased willingness to be involved in strategies to right long-standing injustices. There are opportunities for individuals of different generations to share their experience, information and knowledge.

Elders from different villages are often brought together, renewing bonds between communities and strengthening the First Nation. Overall, land use and occupancy mapping helps to invigorate a people's pride in its cultural heritage. In addition, the administrative and technical capacity acquired through successful mapping projects increases the nation's abilities to administer and manage its territory.

Listed below are some of the types of land use and occupancy information that have been mapped by aboriginal groups.

- ◆ Places where animals are harvested for food, clothing, medicines, tools, and other purposes.
- ◆ Places where plant materials are harvested for food, clothing, medicines, tools, shelter and fuel.
- ◆ Places where rocks, minerals, and soils are collected for making tools, conducting ceremonies, and other purposes.
- ◆ Ecological knowledge of habitats and sites critical to the survival of important animal populations; for instance, caribou migration corridors, islands where moose calve, waterfowl breeding grounds and staging areas, and spawning beds.
- ◆ Habitation sites, such as settlements, trading posts, cabins, camps, and burial grounds.
- ◆ Spiritual or sacred places such as ceremony sites, rock paintings, areas inhabited by non-human or supernatural beings, and birth and death sites.
- ◆ Legends and other accounts about specific places.
- ◆ Travel and trade routes.
- ◆ Aboriginal place names.

Dr. Peter Usher, one of the pioneers of land use and occupancy methodology, has made an important distinction between "use" and "occupancy." He regards some of the above kinds of information as evidence of one or the other, but not both. Peter has looked closely at this distinction while examining First Nations' maps, and his work indicates that it is critical to pay attention to the difference between use and occupancy when using maps in certain political processes.

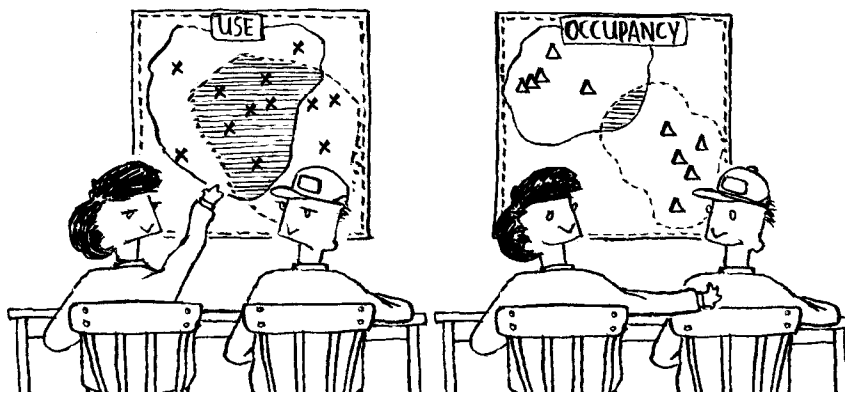
The following distinction draws directly from Peter's work:

Use refers to activities involving the harvest of traditional resources; things like hunting, trapping, fishing, gathering of medicinal plants and berry picking, and travelling to engage in these activities. For any given community or nation, use occurs over a specific geographic area.

Occupancy refers to the area which, as Peter puts it, a "particular group regards as its own by virtue of continuing use, habitation, naming, knowledge, and control."

These two geographic areas are usually different in extent. Use mapping documents the locations where activities like hunting, fishing and travelling occur. Occupancy mapping, by contrast, records the following types of information: stories and legends about places; ecological knowledge of places; indigenous place names; habitation sites like cabins and burial grounds.

The geographic extent of use tends to be larger than the extent of occupancy, and in Peter Usher's words, "limits of occupancy are likely to be much more stable over time than the limits of use; the mapping of occupancy, in contrast to use, would normally reveal both much less overlap and a more obvious boundary between aboriginal territories" (Figure 1).



The really important point that Peter makes is that the overlap problem in current claims processes is probably the result of mapping use instead of occupancy. Claims based on mapped occupancy would almost certainly generate less boundary conflict between nations, while still respecting nations' own understandings of their territorial limits. Land claims processes get seriously bogged down because of the overlap issue. This may serve non-native government agendas, but it frustrates the aspirations of aboriginal peoples. If you are going to use data to identify territorial boundaries for purposes of land claims, think about whether it is in your best interest that the negotiations be based primarily on occupancy data.

FIGURE 1 Use Versus Occupancy

For many neighbouring nations, territorial limits based on the mapping of use – the harvesting of traditional resources – probably generates a lot of artificial overlap. A problem is that infrequent and far flung trips to obtain animals and plants, often with the permission of the adjacent nation, get included. The mapping of occupancy – locations about which people have knowledge of ecology, legends and indigenous place names, and where they have built habitations and buried their dead – is likely respectful of the nations' true territorial limits while generating less overlap. Negotiations based primarily on occupancy would, it seems, be more constructive in reconciling First Nations' interests.