The Métis in western Canada have a long history of sustainable entrepreneurial economies based on knowledge systems closely tied to their traditional territories. However, Métis Indigenous knowledge has not been sufficiently studied as a knowledge base despite the fact that Canada’s environmental legislative regime speaks to the importance of Indigenous knowledge in addressing global environment crises, developing sustainable lifestyles, and protecting global biodiversity. Métis experience, knowledge, and effective economic and environmental stewardship over natural resources is seldom the focus of studies and is hardly ever given appropriate consideration in land and resource management or in conservation strategies and policy (Kermoal 2016; Khumar and Janz 2010; Chrétien and Murphy 2009).

1 Knowledge linked to medicine and health is highly sought after by bio-prospectors and biotechnology, pharmaceutical, and human health care industries. Traditional knowledge is often at the core of new ideas in these industries. However, the Aboriginal people who contribute such knowledge rarely receive the benefit for these contributions but rather are much more likely to find themselves stripped of access to and use of such knowledge as a result of intellectual property regimes. For more details on Indigenous peoples and biopiracy, see Ikechi Mgbeoji (2006).
Although historians have noted the diversity of Métis communities across western Canada (Payment 1990; Ens 1996; St. Onge 2004; Foster 2006; Macdougall 2010), no comprehensive analysis of Métis land use patterns and conservation practices, whether historical or contemporary, has been conducted. To overcome such a dearth of information as well as to support a Métis land claim, in 2000, the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan undertook a land use and occupancy mapping study in the Northwestern region of Saskatchewan. Métis traditional knowledge remains a fairly unexplored area of research (Chrétien and Murphy 2009), and an even bigger gap exists when it comes to Métis women’s knowledge. Especially in the area of resource management, as well as in relation to land claims, women’s traditional knowledge and responsibilities have often been neglected or even overlooked entirely (see Chapter 5 of this book). And yet, in the northwestern region of Saskatchewan and elsewhere, Métis women have played and continue to play a significant role in the preservation and development of the Métis as a unique and vibrant Aboriginal people. Despite encroachments on their land, the Métis of Northwest Saskatchewan continue to sustain their identity through their relationship to the land. The Métis refer to the land as “their life” since it supports the basic social, political, and economic benefits that are crucial to their way of being and to their way of thinking.

In 2000, in order to redress this dearth of information as well as to support a Métis land claim, the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan undertook a land use and occupancy mapping study in the region of northwestern Saskatchewan. In this chapter, we present the preliminary results of this community-based research project. The Métis communities in the region include La Loche, Buffalo Narrows, Île-à-la-Crosse, Jans Bay, Cole Bay, Beauval, Pinehouse, Sapawgamik, Patuanak, Michele Village, St. George’s Hill, Bay Creek, Garson Lake, Ducharme Lake, Black Point, Turnor Lake, and Green Lake. Photos and interviews collected during the research project bring to the fore valuable insights into Métis women’s knowledge of the land. As we hope to demonstrate, Métis women have maintained an intimate relationship with the land and their traditional territories, especially as hunters, fishers, and food providers, and they are concerned about conservation and the safeguarding of traditional knowledge as an expression of and a means of sustaining the Métis way of life. Although they are underrepresented on management boards, maintenance of their stewardship of the land remains a major goal at a time when traditional Métis territories are coveted by large-scale development projects.
From Métis Land Rights to Community-Based Research

Historically, Northwestern Saskatchewan was known as the English River District, an area that linked the Churchill River and Hudson Bay with the Mackenzie and Athabasca river systems and served as a central point of commercial trade and transport in fur trade history (Macdougall 2010). The Methye Portage, an 18-kilometre divide that separated the Hudson Bay and Mackenzie River drainage systems, was a strategic location in the fur trade and helped influence the development of western Canada. By 1776, Montréal traders were active in the Athabasca country, and the Methye Portage and the trading posts along the Green Lake–Île-à-la-Crosse–Portage La Loche transport corridor served as a vital nexus in the Canadian fur trade (Macdougall 2010). The importance of the fur trade, and especially the transportation through this region, meant that the skills of the local Métis were in high demand. They were boatmen, traders, interpreters, and provisioners, and they became an essential element of fur trade success. The trade economy involved entire families: “men, women and children all worked for the Hudson’s Bay Company’s sphere of influence in a variety of capacities: as servants, unpaid labourers, freemen, and . . . as free traders” (Macdougall 2010, 242). By the mid-nineteenth century, the concentration of French- and Michif-speaking Métis was so significant that Île-à-la-Crosse was selected in 1846 as the site of the first Oblate mission outside of the Red River settlement. Many of these “first generation families,” as Brenda Macdougall refers to them, would marry within their community and spawn a second generation (2006, 445). With time the population increased. The first census in the area, in 1881, reveals a population of 251 people in the communities of Île-à-la-Crosse, Portage La Loche, and Green Lake, with 84 percent being defined as either French breed or English breed and 74 percent relating their place of birth as the Northwest Territories (Parker and Tough 2005, 43, 46, 60, and 63). By 1891, the population in these three communities had increased to 695 people, with 90 percent being born in the communities (Parker and Tough 2005, 97 and 121) and, by 1901, the Métis population was enumerated at 97 percent (Parker and Tough 2005, 163 and 193). According to Macdougall:

Metis society emerged and gained strength because of its connection to indigenous worldviews that were predicated on the children's ancestral connection to the lands of their female connections. Over time, the region itself was transformed into a Metis homeland not only by virtue

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of the children’s occupation of the territory, but also through their relationship with the Cree and Dene women and fur trader men from whom they were descended. The Metis, like their Indian and fur trader relations, lived in a social world based on reciprocal sharing, respectful behavior between family members, and an understanding of the differences between themselves and outsiders. The Metis of the area were part of the economic structure of the fur trade, facilitating its success by embodying the principles of family loyalty, accountability, and responsibility. (2010, 45)

These former centres of economic and religious activities were the forerunners of today’s Métis communities in the region.

The treaty and scrip commissioners came into the area in 1906 and in 1907, in an effort to extinguish the Aboriginal title to these lands. According to Tough and McGregor (2007a, 1), “In September of 1906, Treaty and Scrip Commissioner J. A. McKenna took scrip applications at the Northwest Saskatchewan communities of Green Lake, Isle à la Crosse, La Loche River, La Loche Mission, and Portage La Loche. Commissioner McKenna did not have time to visit all of the Métis communities and Indian Bands in the Treaty Ten region that year.” Commissioner T. Borthwick visited the remaining communities a year later. Overall, in 1906, “more people in the Treaty Ten region took scrip than joined treaty” (Tough and McGregor 2007a, 1). The Federal Justice Department maintained a legal opinion, which stated that any interest Métis had to their traditional territories by way of Aboriginal title claims was effectively extinguished by scrip. The effect of the scrip process on Métis Aboriginal title remains to this day an unanswered legal question (Tough and McGregor 2007b; Tough and Dorion 1993).

For the first time in the history of the region, scrip and treaty “drew a line in the northwest” and “divided treaty and non-treaty people geopolitically and legally” (Macdougall 2010, 247). With time, the Métis of Northwest Saskatchewan became increasingly frustrated by the implementation of

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2 The 1998 Court of Queen’s Bench decision in R. v. Morin and Daigneault ([1996] 3 C.N.L.R. 157 (Sask Prov Ct.); aff [1998] 1 C.N.L.R. 182 (Sask.QB)) upheld that the effect of scrip on Aboriginal title was a separate question from its effect on resource use, holding that the Métis Aboriginal right to hunt and fish and gather for food was not extinguished. The question of Aboriginal title was not decided. It should be noted, however, that in these court actions, Métis women provided invaluable information regarding traditional knowledge to the court.
provincial laws and policy, which interfered with their constitutional rights to maintain their traditions and practices. Throughout the twentieth century, government regulations imposed seasonal restrictions on hunting and fishing, and trappers had to obtain licenses and list the animals they caught. While the goal of these government regulations was to conserve fur or fish stocks, the consequences of the fur blocks and the quotas limited trapping or fishing seasons and the amount of animals trapped or fish. For instance, in the 1940s, Saskatchewan and Manitoba introduced registered trapline programs, “which gave trappers the right to trap in a registered area, provided the trapper conserved stock. Provincial governments also implemented aid programs to help Métis trappers” (Young, Paquin, and Préfontaine 2003, 9). Such regulations pushed the Métis to look for other sources of employment to survive. Overall, they had to fight to preserve a way of life.

In March 1994, the Métis of Northwest Saskatchewan launched a land claim—Métis Nation of Saskatchewan v. Saskatchewan and Canada (Q.B. No. 619 of 1994, Judicial Centre of Saskatoon)—in the Court of Queen’s Bench seeking three major declarations in relation to their traditional territories, which they claim encompass much of Northwestern Saskatchewan: Aboriginal title to the lands and resources in the claim area; Aboriginal hunting, fishing, and gathering rights; and the right of self-government.

In 1998, in preparation for the litigation, the Métis entered into a partnership with historical geographer Frank Tough, of the University of Alberta, to conduct broad-based research on their historic land use practices and patterns in the region. Tough and the community together developed research questions, and a Métis traditional land use and occupancy mapping program which was implemented in 2000. In addition, in 2003, the partners were successful in obtaining funding from the Community-University Research Alliance (CURA) program of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for a five-year project titled “Otipimsuak—the Free People: Métis Land and Society in Northwest Saskatchewan.” The CURA project involved the Northwest Saskatchewan Métis Council, the Métis Nation in Saskatchewan, and researchers from the University of Alberta and the University of Saskatchewan. The land use study determined that

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3 Clement Chartier, president of the Métis National Council and a resident of Northwest Saskatchewan, and Frank Tough served as the principal investigators on this project. Kathy Hodgson-Smith, who, at the time, was the research director for the
the traditional territory of the Métis of Northwest Saskatchewan extended across the Alberta border along the southern shores of Lake Athabasca and into the central parts of Alberta. It also included Frobisher Lake, in west-central Saskatchewan, with its intricate web of islands that are essentially non-navigable to the visitor.

The collaboration between Tough and members of the Northwest Saskatchewan Métis communities revealed the Métis multidimensional geographic knowledge of the region that can be defined as “knowledge in action” since practical skills are mixed with stories and place names. Being on the land is not just a way of life but also a way of being and a way of “speaking the land.” As French geographer Béatrice Collignon argues in Knowing Places: The Inuit, Landscapes and the Environment (2006), land is extremely important in the construction of identity for Aboriginal peoples since physical landscapes transform into “memoryscapes,” inhabited by human beings, animals, and spirits of all kinds.

During a meeting organized in the summer of 1999 between Métis leaders and the Métis citizens of Northwest Saskatchewan in Île-à-la-Crosse, Métis elders from the different communities spoke at length about their deep attachment to the land. They also shared their worries about the future, especially around issues of land and resource use and management, and the interference with subsistence and commercial livelihoods, including fishing, hunting, trapping, and gathering. One of the most significant issues they saw was the increasing number of youth who were growing toward dependence on alcohol and drugs. They felt that the youth faced these issues as a result of the loss of relationship with their historic lands, and the lifestyles that had sustained their families for generations. The young people were losing access to their rightful cultural inheritance and identity in relation to their traditional lands and resources now being governed by non-Aboriginal governments. They were losing access to their language and the traditional knowledge that embodies the Métis way of life. They

Northwest Saskatchewan Métis Council, oversaw the design and implementation of the research, and also worked with a team of researchers who recorded the interviews. These interviews have since been summarized, but they have not yet been fully transcribed. We are grateful to the families who participated in this research, who also provided the photographs that appear in this chapter and gave their permission to reproduce them here. Nathalie Kermoal was a collaborator on Dr. Frank Tough’s CURA-SSHRC Grant Otipimsuaq: Métis Land and Society in Northwest Saskatchewan.
raised further concerns with the encroachment of extractions industries in sensitive environmental areas, the clear-cutting of forests, the negative impact on some species of animals and plants, the contamination of lakes and rivers, and the erratic behaviour of game and fish populations and the significant changes in weather patterns.

They spoke to the fact that the land was not being cared for, as it should be. While governments held constitutional jurisdiction over lands and resources of the area, the stewardship necessary for conservation and preservation of the lands and resources for future generations was perceived as absent. The Métis elders of Northwestern Saskatchewan are echoing the same concerns as elders in other Métis communities across the Northwest (Métis Centre 2008). For them, an important aspect of the solution to the issues facing the young people is to rebuild a stronger caring relationship between the youth and their traditional lands, based upon Métis indigenous knowledge. The young people are to be given a greater understanding of the history of the region and the role of the Métis, and are to become re-engaged as the proper stewards of their traditional land and the resources.

Based on the concerns raised by the elders, the Métis community conducted the study. A list of potential Métis interviewees was drawn up beginning with the elders and senior traditional resource users. The study area was determined to be the general area of the 1906 scrip commission. A questionnaire was then developed to determine the content of the study, and interviews were digitally audio and visually recorded.

During each interview a map was produced which captured the territory and the general nature of the use of the land and resources by species (plant, fish, animal), by season, and at what point in time (year) and for what purpose (see figure 6.1). Sacred sites (medicinal, cultural, burial) were located as well. Historic and contemporary photographs capturing cultural practices of Métis traditional resource users and knowledge holders were collected and scanned. It should be noted that the community members brought the photographs on a voluntary basis. Then, a second round of interviews was done based on the photographs. In addition, working with the Northern Saskatchewan Trappers Association, a series of interviews were conducted with trappers (men and women) on the effect of government actions on trapping and traditional lifestyles and knowledge associated with trapping. A genealogical study was also undertaken as well as a specific study on the work and knowledge of Métis women.
Figure 6.1 An example of one of the maps based on Eleanor Moberly’s interview.

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The documentation of the lives and experiences of the Métis traditional knowledge holders provided the entire Métis community with a common strength, a shared history, and an enriched hope for the future. The information gathered was presented to the community, where researchers made oral presentations of the information gathered and the maps were placed on the wall of the community centre for Métis citizens to review and discuss. Traditional knowledge holders told their stories to the crowd. These stories, told in Michif, Cree, and Dene languages, were recorded in an effort to hold them for future generations.

The traditional land use and occupancy mapping study was conducted in four languages: Michif, Cree, Dene, and English. A Michif and Cree translator was engaged and one of the students involved in the project served as a Dene translator and interviewer. Interviews were conducted in the language of choice of the interviewee and later translated and transcribed. Many of the elders interviewed spoke all four of the languages and in addition spoke

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4 Mapping was a challenge as the modern maps provided by the provincial government used in preparation of the personal maps of traditional use were often identified by place names that were unfamiliar to the Métis resource users. Names of lakes, streams, particular hunting and fishing territories, the location of settlement and burial grounds were mostly identified by Michif, Cree, or Dene names and not known by the names more recently assigned by governments. For example, the Métis Nation region of Northwest Saskatchewan which encompasses the communities of Buffalo Narrows, Michele Village, Black Point, St. George’s Hill, Turnor Lake, Garson Lake, Bear Creek, La Loche, and Ducharme is called the Clearwater Clear Lake Métis Region. This is one of the twelve regions in the governance structure of the Métis Nation-Saskatchewan. The map of Saskatchewan, as drawn by the provincial government, identifies this lake, known by the Métis as Clear Lake, as Peter Pond Lake. Traditionally, specific sites and waterways were often named after families from the area. For example in the community of Buffalo Narrows, the main channel joining the now named Churchill Lake and Peter Pond Lake is known as the Keizie Channel, named after the Keizie family. The province has named this channel the Kisis Channel. The Métis community has raised this naming issue with the government; however, to date, their concern has not been addressed. With many of the traditional resource users, orientation to maps of particular territories often took a lot of time and often required a translator. The elderly traditional knowledge holder was intimately familiar with their traditional territories and had never relied upon government maps that took an aerial view and showed these new place names and elevation levels. The study was undertaken on map scales of 1:200,000 to maintain privacy of particular use areas and to allow for a more general discussion of use and occupancy.
French, learned in the Residential School or in conversing with the Roman Catholic priests and nuns. As well, many of the Métis families from North-west Saskatchewan were French Métis.

Métis Women’s Knowledge of Waterways, Land, and Resources

While much research on the Métis has focused mainly on hunting practices, Frank Tough (2000, 3) documents that “the importance of fish has been under-appreciated as early research grappled with the relative merits of buffalo hunting and agriculture,” adding that “freshwater fish has always been an integral part of the Métis way of life.” What Tough describes for Manitoba can apply to Saskatchewan since water is very central to the region. The summaries of the interviews indicate that women and children have always been part of the daily navigation of the waters and still are, as is illustrated in figures 6.2. They participated in the fishing industry and prepared the fish taken for subsistence purposes.

Many of the women interviewed, now mothers, grew up on the same waterways and trails as their ancestors. Looking at the maps, women discussed traditional ways of fishing and hunting, talked about the appropriate time of day to fish or hunt moose or caribou, the appropriate means by which to attract various species to be taken (see figure 6.3). They know moose calls and how to listen to the loon for information as to animal movement. They know where the animals will be during any given season and when they move to new areas.

As well, they know how to fish with nets and line, how to snare an animal, how to skin it to protect the meat, and how to keep it clean and free from infestation and contamination. For instance, each year an annual sucker harvest takes place at Sucker Creek, Saskatchewan. The families all come together for one or two days. The creek is teeming with suckers during the spawning season. This is the only season when suckers are edible. The women set up camp alongside the creek, setting up tables and smoke-houses and pails for storage of the sucker fishheads. The men and children gather the fish from the creek with nets or by hand, standing in the bubbling creek where the fish are moving along, layered up to two or three feet deep. The heads are removed and used to make sucker head soup. The filets are cleaned, with the skin still on, and smoked flesh side down. The filets are then frozen and when needed they are fried in a frying pan to warm them up. The entire year’s harvest is taken in one or two days during the spring.
Figure 6.2 Hanson and Pederson families water activities, Buffalo Narrows.

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Women handle firearms, traps, and filleting knives. Since they are responsible for the preservation of food, they smoke meat and fish immediately after the kill to preserve it. The meat is cut into strips and the fish is filleted and hung from wooden racks over a fire (see figure 6.4, 6.5, and 6.6). Dry meat and smoked fish continue to be eaten as delicacies today. Hunting, fishing, trapping, and gathering serve as the means of feeding the family.

Through their testimonies, women revealed that they learned the knowledge from their mothers and grandmothers, and they want to pass it down to their children and grandchildren. Early on, as children, they learned the limits of their family territory as well as limits of the territory of neighbouring families. The family returns to their own territory on a cyclical basis each season. Territorial integrity is an essential part of maintaining control over conservation of species and habitats. Respect for territory is crucial to keeping outsiders out and limiting the capacity of individual families to have negative impacts on species populations. The family territory becomes an essential identifier, provides a sense of belonging and responsibility and cultural identity. Marriage and adoption are two ways in which kinship is expanded and territory is shared.
Figure 6.4
Drying meat on the land.
Photo courtesy of Cecile Morin.

Figure 6.5
Cecile and Alfred Morin family drying meat today.

Figure 6.6
Cecile Morin preparing meat for a cultural gathering.
Camps are set up at various sites along the routes through the territory. In the past, semi-permanent dwellings were established: tents with a wood stove and chimney. This practice is still used today (see figure 6.7). The women cook over a stone fireplace created in situ from local resources. Tarps are stretched over the top of the tents to keep the rain and branches from falling directly on the tents. When large families or a group of families engage in the seasonal cycle of hunting or fishing, tarps are typically hung above the tents on an angle, and arranged in an overlapping method extending from one tent to another, creating an adjoined ceiling over the village of tents and forming walkways in between. During the Palmbere Days festival, held annually at Palmbere Lake, such a scene is common.

In winter while in the bush, individuals keep warm by using a feather robe, or a goose or duck feather blanket, made by the women (see figure 6.8). These robes are all that is needed for bedding even in winter. Some of the territories of Métis families extend more than 200 kilometres in distance; the men often leave for the seasonal hunt with only a feather robe. The women pluck and prepare the feathers for use in the blankets, sewing and decorating the blanket covers. The blankets are sometimes stored and transported in a cloth bag.
Firewood is gathered as needed from the forest floor and from harvesting trees along the way. Knowing which tree makes the best firewood for the particular activity and season is part of the traditional knowledge. The women also gather wild berries, mushrooms, and duck eggs. They know where and during what time of year each activity is appropriate. They know which species of animals and plants are essential to sustain their way of life and their overall health as human beings. They know when and where to gather and harvest and how to prepare the resources for sustenance. Some of this knowledge is gained from personal experience and some is the knowledge that has been passed on from one generation and one family to another over many years.

![Figure 6.8 Eleanor Moberly plucking birds.](image)

Apart from providing food, Métis women process animal hides to make them usable in the production of various types of clothing. In Northwest Saskatchewan, moose hide is the hide most predominantly used in the production of clothing. Caribou hide is also prepared and used. The animal is skinned at the time of the kill and the hide is typically stored in ice water until the following spring. The hide is retrieved and brought back to camp. The hides are then stretched onto large frames and tanned by hand, removing all hair and flesh (see figures 6.9 and 6.10).
Figure 6.9  Mary Hanson tanning hide with a young boy.
Figure 6.10  Eleanor Moberly tanning a moose hide, Turnor Lake.
The hide is then smoked. Once tanned, the hide is used for clothing, typically decorated with beadwork and fur. Knowledge of how to smoke a hide includes the knowledge of particular wood, bark and needles/leaves, heat, duration, and weather suitable for the tanning process. This knowledge is gained and changed through experience as it continues to be passed from one generation to the next. As times change, the skinning of the flesh from the hide often requires adaptation of old knowledge with new technologies, by way of tools and methods. Tanning hides is premised upon the knowledge of the particular animal hide, the appropriate time to prepare the hide and the ability to make or find necessary tools and the recipes to prepare the mixtures that are used to treat and prepare the hides for cleaning. Knowledge of the various trees that are used to smoke the hides is essential (see figure 6.11). This is true of smoking of fish and meat also.

Moccasins, gauntlet gloves, and jackets are the most common clothing items. Beadwork designs are regional and familial (see figure 6.12). The Métis beadwork patterns include flowers, eagles, thunderbirds, and geometric shapes. Women become known for their particular beadwork patterns. Clothing is also trimmed with rabbit, beaver, fox, and other fur. Gauntlets are commonly decorated with beaver fur.
Métis Women as Stewards of the Land

Certain knowledge holders serve the whole community and are essentially the elders of the elders. Some act as resources for the whole community, while others inform their own “students” or take on “students” as required to ensure their knowledge is not lost. These “students” are sometimes sons and daughters and sometimes from the extended family. Traditional knowledge holders often hold specific kinds of knowledge; some are known by members through the public service they provide or the specific role they hold in the cultural community. For Karen Anderson (2011, 145), “as teachers of the youngest children, then, elders taught them to be contributing members of their societies, and they did this through formal, non-formal, and informal education.”

According to the interviewees, while individual persons hold knowledge, customary Métis law governs the sharing and access to much of the knowledge. Oftentimes the knowledge is protected or has limited access because it is held and expressed in the Michif, Cree, or Dene language. Other knowledge is demonstrated in situ and held by particular families in relation to
a specific tract of land or ecosystem. Other knowledge is shared during a ceremony. These safeguards provide a cultural barrier to unauthorized use of the knowledge.

The old ways of doing things are always under review and modification. As territories become more affected by development, such as forestry and mining, traditional knowledge–based conservation and agricultural practices once used and relied upon are interrupted. Roads are built and areas that had remained largely unaffected by human actions except for small family-sized economic activity, are now subject to significant change. Reforestation initiatives are often undertaken. The women have reported at annual trapper and fishermen conventions their observations of the success of these initiatives and the ultimate impact on the animals and plant resources.

One medicine person discussed the return to the family's traditional territory to get plants associated with medicinal uses. Often one child—a grandchild, niece, or nephew—shows an interest and a predilection for medicinal knowledge, and that child is selected for the passing down of such knowledge. The medicine person will then return to the traditional territory over several years during appropriate seasons for the gathering of plants and roots used for this purpose. Scheduling around school timetables, the young person is taken to the territory. Here the process for finding and gathering the plant or root, and its agricultural care, is taught, along with the teaching of ceremonies that accompany its access and use. As traditional territories are appropriated and regulated by licensing and permit arrangements, Métis access is negatively affected. Alternative sources of the plants must be found or determined through traditional methods such as prayer, ceremony, or through research and experimentation. In this way, traditional knowledge is adapted over time, continuously being developed and created.

The women reported being taught their skills from their mothers and grandmothers, although many women also recounted their own research inquiries, studies, and findings. Medicinal knowledge is premised on being able to identify properly and classify appropriate trees, plants, and roots; on knowing the specific territory where they grow; on knowing the routes to these territories; and on managing the continued wellness of the environment and region to sustain access to these resources. Medicinal knowledge also involves the knowledge of cultural ceremonies to ensure that the proper spiritual respect entwined in the relationship is shown. To teach the concepts underlying these relationships many stories, such as
those about Wesakachak, capture the values that must be honoured. These stories are told in Cree, Michif, or Dene. Wesakachak is a mythological character whose foolish and heroic adventures allow children and adults alike a chance to learn the values and teachings of the culture. The stories speak of the natural world and the medicines that are available on the land. According to Maria Campbell, Wesakachak stories “taught the young how to live ‘a good life’ and reminded the old to stay on that path. The stories were multilayered with knowledge and teachings interwoven into each of them” (Anderson 2011, xvii).

The stewardship of the land is central to the women’s worldview. Some of the women have been hunting, fishing, trapping, and gathering with their husbands in their traditional territory for several decades. One of the women had observed an area that had been logged over and had been subsequently subject to a reforestation scheme. She compared the success of this forest’s rejuvenation with respect to particular plant and animal species with one that had been burned out by forest fire. She commented on the underbrush, the plant species that returned after the burn, which attracted birds, smaller rodents, and then those species upon which these plants and animals depended in the food chain. She reported how the logging process, by contrast, removed all of the underbrush and essentially devastated the area of essential plants and ultimately affected the animal species. She had made these observations over about a thirty-year period. Her knowledge has implications for human and animal well-being.

Women are essential fact finders and resource managers since they are alert to fish disorders and disease, to changing climate situations, and to the varying plant and animal species populations. As stewards of the land, they were and continue to be part of the discussion within the Métis community on conservation and protection of vulnerable populations, the culling of predators, and the teaching of spiritual traditions related to life on the land.

Métis Women’s Knowledge Expresses a Way of Life

In the Métis communities of Northwest Saskatchewan, the youth population is growing rapidly. Grandparents raise many Métis youth, at least

5 Data from the National Household Survey (NHS) show that “1,400,685 people had an Aboriginal identity in 2011, representing 4.3% of the total Canadian population. Aboriginal youth under the age of 25 represent almost half of the Aboriginal
from the formative years to age 11. The general consensus is that if the way of life of the Métis is to be preserved and the traditional knowledge which is so critical to the advancement of Métis culture is to be passed on to the younger generation, then continuing efforts will have to be made to invest in this regard. The study confirmed that the traditional knowledge is typically passed on in the context of social relationships. The learning context is often part of the day-to-day life when the family is gathering food or materials. While community Elders play an important role, kinship ties also play a significant part in the transmission of traditional knowledge. Gender is a significant element of this transmission as girls help their mothers, aunts, or grandmothers, and the boys are typically in the company of their fathers, uncles and grandfathers. According to Mililani Trask (n.d., n.p.),

In Indigenous societies, reciprocity is the way things work—in society, within the family and extended family frameworks, and in the relationships between human kind and the rest of God’s creation. Reciprocity is not defined or limited by the language of the market economy because it implies that more is owed than financial payment, when goods and services exchange hands. Reciprocity is the way of balance—planting precedes harvesting, sowing precedes reaping. In most Indigenous societies there is a common understanding (sometimes referred to as the “original instructions”), that humankind’s role in the world is to be the guardians of the creation. Indigenous peoples know that if we care for, nurture, and protect the earth, it will feed, clothe and shelter us.7

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6 Aboriginal children under the age of 15 are more likely than their non-Aboriginal counterparts to live with their grandparents without either of their parents present. The 2006 census showed that 3 percent of First Nations children were living with their grandparents, as were 2 percent of Inuit children and 2 percent of Métis children. The proportion of non-Aboriginal children under the age of 15 years that lived solely with their grandparents was 0.4 percent (Statistics Canada 2010, 9).

7 As Trask notes, gender is a sociological construct that encompasses economic, social, and cultural distinctions between women and men, arising from their unique
In the study area, as part of the reciprocity process, Métis youth camps are organized and take place on the land, with family members teaching all aspects of the hunt, including the conservation ethics around the taking of wildlife and other resources, the hunting techniques, the way to cut and preserve meat, to value sharing the resource, to use the hide and to live off the land during the appropriate season for the hunt. Youth of both genders are taught how to build and maintain shelters and how to create a home. They learn to care for one another, their families, the land, the animals and the fish as a way of life. Family members join the youth over the course of the camp.

They are taught to build a fire, to use snare wire, to use a shotgun and a rifle as well as to kill and how to make use of the hunt or the catch for food. They are instructed how to prepare the meat or fish for a meal, how not to waste, and how to preserve for the future. They gather mushrooms and other edible vegetation. They are told the stories of the families and the communities around the campfire. The men often play the fiddle and the women tell of the history and train the young in the wildlife diet and lifestyle.

The women organize and guide these teaching opportunities, typically with their husbands (see figure 6.13). The camps are often done with the assistance of the eldest siblings who demonstrate for the younger ones the core teaching of respect, reciprocity, and stewardship. They are taught basic roles, authority, and cultural place. Indigenous peoples and societies delineate these roles. The pathway to “meaning” is through the expression of these unique roles through cultural protocols and in response to basic survival needs of the Indigenous society. She further discusses the fundamental value of the gift economy underlying the relationships that underpin Indigenous societies, and the reciprocity, a give and take, that infers the essential recognition of the value of mutual sharing, within the family and extended family networks, across societies and with the rest of human kind and the Creator. This essential value permeates the Indigenous view of their relationship to the land and the obligation as stewards to care for, nurture and protect the earth: Indigenous societies serve the earth and the lands provide. In this view, women have specific and highly specialized knowledge, have developed expertise and knowledge specific to the local environment, ecosystems, plants, animals and their uses, and contribute to the well-being of their families and communities through their key role in a gift economy. “The gift economy is diametrically opposed to the market economy. The Gift Economy is collective, the market economy favours individualism. The Gift Economy thrives when there is a bounty to be given. The market economy increases the price and fiscal value of items that are rare commodities. The values, activities, and outcomes of these diametrically opposed economy systems also conflict” (n.d., n.p.).
survival skills. They attend on the lakes by boat and canoe and in the bush on skidoos (snowmobiles) and on foot.

The elders teach the young people as an act of love for them as individuals, for their families and for the community. Teaching is an expression of love for the Métis way of life and the land. The elders always say: “our land is our life.” The young people are taught the skills that underlie the relationship they have with the land. The sharing of meat and hides, the collaboration in caring for the children, are all part of the healthy Métis community. Everyone has a role to play in the well-being of others. These aspects of life are part of the pride and the sense of belonging, being in control of one’s life. Certain young people are singled out for particular skills such as medicine.

![Figure 6.13 A class from the Cecile and Alfred Morin Métis Culture Camp for youth.](image)

When a large community gathering is planned, such as Palmbere Days, fish and firewood are gathered and distributed among the families as part of the cultural celebration. In an extended family gathering the food is hunted, trapped, or harvested in the family context, and the children and grandchildren are taught how to prepare the fish for meals and for preservation. In the nuclear family context, the meat and fish gathered as part of the subsistence practices are cut and wrapped and distributed among family members, the sick and the elderly, and then among other families. The women make the decisions regarding the distribution of the meat and fish.
Within the kinship system there exists also a cultural practice, which provides for “experts” from within the Métis community. The advice and guidance of these people are sought when certain activities are undertaken. As well, families typically join one another during cultural festivals and to take part in the hunting or trapping in both commercial and subsistence settings (see figures 6.14 and 6.15). Intermarriage of families provides for opportunity to share and learn the knowledge held and developed during the previous season from each other.

Knowledge of the environment is shared during cultural festivals and general social interactions at community meetings and events. When meat or fish is shared, conversations are often about the state of fish stocks and changes in the landscape and local environment. Discussions of weather conditions are shared and discussed. As each family will hold a particular set of knowledge of their particular territory, the sharing of a family meal will provide ample opportunity for the sharing of essential knowledge among family members. This knowledge is then shared in a reciprocal way with other families during larger community events.

Festivals provide opportunity for sharing and learning together. Métis women often compete in animal calling, log sawing, hauling, and other cultural competitions. This builds skills and provides for teaching and learning in a social context and for sharing joy and laughter in the shared culture context. Métis traditional territories extend outside of provincial boundaries and families cover extensive territories, ranging as far as 300 kilometres in width. As such, the knowledge shared covers considerable distances and a diversity of topics.

Métis women continue to practice their traditional knowledge as a way of life. They may be employed in professional and other jobs and many have now settled into the villages and settlement areas close to church and school. Some continue, with their husbands, to trap and live off the land. However, at every opportunity, they report their return to the land to carry on whatever practices that time and access will allow. As in the past, many families spend all available time on the land. Some families are limited to spending holiday times together to practice, learn, teach, and share the knowledge.

Some families, however, have made and continue to draw their entire annual income from traditional lifestyles. While commercial fisheries are governed by quotas and by local community conservation and cooperative boards, trapping remains a way of life for many, although the level of income
Figure 6.14  The Morin family on the land.
Figure 6.15  The Morin family at Potato Point family gravesite.
from trapping is extremely low. The protest against fur harvests by environmental protection groups has had negative effects on the small sustainable economic Métis family unit, who attempt to maintain traditional cultural trapping practices. In 2000, one family reported that the source of their entire annual income of $6,000 was from trapping.

In contrast to government compensation given to farming or other economies when governments interfere with access to lands and resources typically relied upon, traditional economies such as trapping are often destroyed without provision of any compensation or accommodation to the trapper. When lands are taken up for roads, agriculture, forestry, or mining, this is often done without consultation, accommodation, or consideration of trappers and traditional resource users. The Métis report showing up on their trap lines to find a single trap strapped to a single tree, with all other trees removed pursuant to a license or permit. The establishment of the Primrose Lake Air Weapons Range caused the Métis to lose access to an entire fur block without compensation or accommodation. The Métis showed up to attend to their business to find themselves blocked from entry onto these lands. Since that time, co-management agreements have been reached with First Nations. The Métis have been blocked from bringing their claim forward through established tribunal processes. Métis women and men are typically part of trapper associations, which attempt to influence government regulation and policy. Few women, if any, sit on management boards or conservation committees. No federal or provincial infrastructures ensure that Métis women, or any women for that matter, are engaged in any conservation or land and resource management regime in Saskatchewan.

As in the past, Métis women often draw an income from making items of clothing for sale. In the nineteenth century, Métis women developed their own floral beaded style and started to make large quantities of objects that were then sold or exchanged. Through their talent, they played an important economic role within the Western Canadian Métis Nation and ensured the survival of their families, which allowed them to express their identity as individuals and as a community (Racette 2004; Kermoal 2007). Women’s beadwork, while a source of pride for a family and for the Métis community as a whole, remains undervalued as an economy. Mass-produced moccasins, often made without proper intellectual property recognition, can be bought at a fraction of the price which would, in fairness, be paid to a woman who has hand-tanned the hide used in this clothing.
As well, the great contribution of women continues to be done through volunteer work, leadership, and through their continued involvement in cultural activities such as the annual Michif language festival hosted by the local school at Île-à-la-Crosse. Métis women have also made a significant contribution to the struggle for constitutional recognition of Métis Aboriginal rights by testifying in courts about the knowledge that lies at the heart of Métis identity and culture. The loss of access to traditional lands and resources is at the core of the Métis struggle to maintain their way of life.

Conclusion

Northwest Saskatchewan Métis women’s specialized environmental and traditional knowledge of lands and resources in their ancestral territories has gone unrecognized and has been undervalued and underutilized. Research involving Métis women’s knowledge should be culturally and geographically situated and understood through a lens that acknowledges the political and socioeconomic history of the particular Métis community, values, practices, language, kinship, and extended family ties. A continued denial of access to and control over traditional territories and resources found in Northwest Saskatchewan would mean a significant loss to the culture of the Métis as a whole, to the Métis family, and to the standing of Métis women in the broader community. The protection of biodiversity and the recognition of the inevitable interrelationship between biodiversity and control over resources lie at the heart of the ultimate challenge of ensuring real space and authority for the ongoing maintenance of the unique culture of the Métis people. The Indigenous knowledge of Métis women, as evidenced in this chapter, contributes in a very significant way to the distinct, vibrant, and unique culture of the Métis people as well as the effort to pursue the stewardship of the land.

Métis women in northwestern Saskatchewan have historically practiced and continue to practice the rich traditional knowledge and skills that will maintain the Métis culture and way of life into the future. As the Métis Nation continues to struggle for recognition of their inherent right to self-determination and to govern their traditional lands and resources, Métis women play an important leadership role in maintaining the link between the past and the future. Their leadership can be understood within the context of the extended family, local community, nation-building, the gift economy, and
the governance of the land. Maintenance of Métis women’s relationships with their traditional lands is the key to maintenance and preservation of the distinct Métis culture, Métis Indigenous knowledge, sustainable resource management practices, and the unique and special knowledge associated with the Métis way of life in that area.

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