

## A Fish Camp Approach to Survey Research

*By James Magdanz*

This short statement offers some personal observations on using household surveys to collect quantitative data in small Arctic communities. First, research questions should be informed by qualitative research, including traditional knowledge, and administered with a reliable and tested survey. Given that, two methodological decisions are crucial: the number of researchers and duration of data collection. At one end of the scale are projects with long durations and a single researcher. At the other end are projects with short durations and multiple researchers. I began my agency career as a slow solo researcher and ended it as a fast team researcher, simply because a team approach worked so much better. It reduces burdens on communities and fatigue of researchers.

Over time, I came to see survey research as rather like going to fish camp. Fish are challenging to capture, and spoil quickly if not well cared for. The same can be said of data; they are challenging to collect, easy to spoil. Fish are wonderful food, when properly stored and distributed. The same is true for data; they must be properly stored and distributed. In a fish camp, there is a clear purpose. Everyone understands their roles, and knows how to use their tools. They all work hard, sometimes in great bursts of energy, and then it's over. Along the way, there can be some friendly competitions to see who can catch or cut the most fish. In conducting survey research, I consciously tried to follow the fish camp model. We had teams working towards a common goal, with controlled data collection, with careful processing, storage, and distribution, and with some friendly competition among researchers.

As momentum builds for community-based Arctic observing systems, it is easy to imagine a system built on the solo researcher model. It is hard to justify multiple social science researchers in a region, let alone in a single community. The solo researcher model also is a way to distribute employment benefits to a maximum number of communities. While there are some success stories – Bob Uhl's daily logs of environmental conditions at *Sisualik* is a wonderful example – there are many more examples of solo researchers gone AWOL. This is especially true of survey research. Asking a hundred people the same exact questions over and over again is tedious and exhausting. Unless you are a graduate student single-mindedly pursuing a degree, there are easier and more interesting ways to make a living.

A promising, uncommon approach to survey research involves indigenous researchers from multiple rural communities working together in a single community. My first limited experience with this came in the 1990s when Elizabeth Andrews asked Clarence Alexander – a Gwich'in leader familiar with survey research from the Council of Athabaskan Tribal Government's own efforts – to join survey projects in Noatak, Shishmaref, and Wales – *Iñupiat* communities. It worked extremely well, and I learned a lot working with Clarence. While project teams are often “vertically” structured, meaning urban agency or university researchers working with rural community researchers, I hope for a future with many more “horizontally” structured teams, community researchers working together, but not always “at home.”

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