

Reply to Commentary

A Plea for Empowerment Through Rational Scepticism: A Brief Rejoinder to Brook

ANTHONY DAVIS^{1*} and KENNETH RUDDLE²

¹Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Nova Scotia B3M2J6, Canada

²Research Centre for Resources and Rural Development, No 23, Lance 1, Van Phu Urban Zone, Ha Dong District, Hanoi, Vietnam

Ryan K. Brook takes issue with our argument that worthwhile social research is obligated to engage rational scepticism, essentially expressed through the design and methodological conduct of research and the questions, concepts and theories informing data analyses, when documenting and representing local ecological knowledge (LEK). Further, he represents our critique as part of “an ongoing simplistic dichotomy” that situates LEK and ‘science’ as oppositional. Indeed, much of the substance of Brook’s commentary is more of a response to analyses we present in several earlier papers, particularly Davis and Ruddle (2010) and Ruddle and Davis (2011), than to the priority foci evident in our *Asian Fisheries Science* essay (Ruddle and Davis 2013). Nonetheless, we appreciate this opportunity to provide comment on our concerns respecting much of LEK social research, as well as to correct key misrepresentations of these concerns as expressed by Brook.

To begin with, our critique (especially Davis and Ruddle 2010) is not directed at ‘communities’ wherein LEK is found and vibrantly expressed; but, rather concerns the manner in which many researchers claim to document and represent LEK. A quote from a previously published comment on the Brook and McLachlan article provides an illustration: “For Brook and McLachlan (2005), research is advocacy; ‘[a] primary goal of any study that involves the application or collection of LEK should thus be to empower communities to contribute in meaningful ways and ensure the studies are of local benefit.’ Further, they contend that ‘testing’ IEK/LEK/TEK claims is fundamentally disrespectful of alternative ways of knowing and knowledge holders” (Davis and Ruddle 2010). Among our stated concerns regarding this sort of presumptive and misinformed advocacy are that: (1) the conduct of research in a manner that fails to document and examine LEK thoroughly; (2) the production of research outcomes and analyses that will further disempower already vulnerable ‘communities’ by setting them up for failure; and (3) further discrediting of the prospects for substantial social research-informed, user-driven contributions to and understandings of the needed intersection of LEK with resource management practices and peoples’ self-sufficiency/governance.

*Corresponding author. E-mail address: Anthony.Davis@msvu.ca

In other words, our position on the requisite attributes for the study of LEK include the propositions that: (1) research be designed and conducted in a manner that reliably and thoroughly documents LEK; (2) that research outcomes be examined with a healthy dose of rational scepticism; and (3) that the strengths and limitations of LEK be truthfully represented and analysed. In our view, research embodying these attributes offers the greatest promise for generating results that can situate LEK as a cornerstone for enabling resource harvesters' and indigenous peoples' empowerment, i.e., determination in setting the terms and conditions for access to and governance of resource use. For us, 'respect' is expressed and assured through inclusive and transparent research collaborations that offer the prospect of research-informed empowerment. Such collaborations require the exercise of rational scepticism from the outset, if just to assure to the extent possible that outcomes embody and represent LEK's strengths and limitations. This is particularly critical in an era of rapid ecological changes.

Contrary to Brook's remarks and intimations, we are anything but misinformed and dismissive about the character and meaning of power differentials and hegemony inherent in both research and neo-liberal driven public and resource management policies. In fact, we have a sustained record of engaging collaborations and working with indigenous and non-indigenous resource harvesters on a variety of concerns. For instance, Davis' and Ruddell's recent collaborations have featured research relationships in which both indigenous and non-indigenous partners have explicitly and emphatically insisted that they want and need research outcomes that will empower their 'voices' (Davis et. al. 2004, and Davis 2007 as well as Social Research for Sustainable Fisheries [<http://faculty.msvu.ca/srsf>], and Ruddell 2013). For them, research-informed empowerment means the capacity to conduct and produce research outcomes that will welcome and withstand critical public inspection. ***They do not seek researcher affirmation that they are holders of distinctive, substantial and legitimate knowledge.*** Such would be at best patronizing. They know this to be the case as a consequence of their experiences interwoven with LEK accumulated through generations of experiences within the same or similar settings. Rather, they want to position the strengths and attributes of their LEK in a manner that affords them respect and consideration, particularly in relations with government managers and in the development of resource governance policies. So, in these collaborations 'respect' includes a welcomed process of reliable documentation, thorough analyses, and truthful examination intended to capture both LEK's strengths and limitations. Indeed, resource users' and indigenous peoples' interest in and motivation for working with outsider researchers/experts are precisely to learn how to engage and achieve these sorts of qualities as a means to strengthen voice and to advance their interests.

Finally, we are somewhat troubled by Brook's use of the term 'community', and the apparent presumption that resource users, be they indigenous or non-indigenous, live within homogeneous social settings wherein one will find largely shared experiences, worldviews, and opinions. Generations of social research has demonstrated the folly of this presumption.

Meaningful social, economic and political divisions exist and are at work within each community and between communities (e.g., gender, ancestry, status, social class), as well as between locality and the broader political economy. Competent LEK-focused social research needs to account for such in the design and conduct of research, e.g., the criterion for selecting/engaging informants, and the analysis of data. Acquiescing to and representing the understandings of ‘local authorities’, however determined, may be necessary and useful; but, certainly would not be sufficient. For example, how do ‘elders’ within some indigenous communities attain this status? On what basis are persons judged to be LEK holders? What are the possible influences of local social, economic and political differences on what is represented as LEK, and who is represented as a LEK holder? These and many additional questions must inform social research thinking about how to design and conduct research, what to consider in data analyses, and how to best represent research outcomes.

The recent initiatives on the part of Canada’s research granting councils to reorient research relationships, particularly with indigenous communities, would not preclude, as intimated by Brook, any of the qualities, approaches and issues we have outlined above. In fact, our collaborative research practices, experiences and outcomes embody all of the core attributes and implications to which these extracts allude, including requisite indigenous organization driven ethics assessments/approvals and focus on community benefits. For us, substantial empowerment entails fostering transparent research relationships and collaborations that provide for the prospect that the outcomes from well-conducted research, while possibly not all that was desired or preferred, will extend understandings and capacities. As such, this provides for the prospect of meaningful contributions and broad-based benefits, including research-informed empowerment. For us, such is achieved primarily through ‘. . . healthy skepticism that asks for good evidence and good argument, that applies critical scrutiny to propositions or claims, that suspends judgment while the evidence is pending, and accepts what the evidence says. . . , independently of prior wishes or partisan beliefs’ (Grayling 2008, as cited in Davis and Ruddle 2010).

References

- Brook, R.K. and S.M. McLachlan. 2005. On using expert based science to ‘test’ local ecological knowledge. *Ecology and Society* 10(2):R3. <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol10/iss2/resp3/i>. Accessed on May 5, 2009.
- Davis, A. 2007. ‘Where’s the Fisk in the Fiskbollen?’ Community University Research Alliances: the case of social research for sustainable fisheries and empowerment. In *I Disiplinenes Grenseland: Tverrfaglighet I teori og*. (eds. T. Nyseth, S. Jentoft, A. Forde, and J. O. Baerenholdt. pp. 128–143. Fagbokforlaget, Oslo, Norway.
- Davis, A., J. M. Hanson, H. Watts and H. MacPherson. 2004. Local ecological knowledge and marine fisheries research: the case of St. Georges Bay fish harvesters’ ecological knowledge of white hake (*Urophycis tenuis*) predation on juvenile American lobster (*Homarus americanus*). *Canadian Journal of Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences* 61:1191–1201.
- Davis, A. and J. Wagner. 2003. Who knows? On the importance of identifying ‘experts’ when researching local ecological knowledge. *Human Ecology: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 31:463–489.

- Davis, A. and K. Ruddle. 2009. Constructing confidence: On the importance of rational skepticism and systematic enquiry in local ecological knowledge research. *Ecological Applications* 20:880-894.
- Grayling, A. C. 2008. There's no excuse for ignorance. *New Scientist* 197:5-85.
- Ruddle, K. 2013. Climate change and intangible cultural heritage: A community-museum research and education project based on local ecological knowledge. In: *Museum and Cultural Heritage: Facing Climate Change*. (eds. Vo Quang Trong, Nguyen Duy Thieu, Kenneth Ruddle, Tu Thi Loan and Vo Hoang Lan), pp. 116-132. Social Sciences Publishing House: Hanoi.
- Ruddle, K. and A. Davis. 2011. What is 'ecological' in local ecological knowledge? Lessons from Canada and Vietnam. *Society and Natural Resources* 24:887-901.
- Ruddle, K. and A. Davis. 2013. Local ecological knowledge (LEK) in interdisciplinary research and application: a critical review. *Asian Fisheries Science* 26:79-100.

Received: 04/10/2013