

## **Risk Communications related to Contaminants in Northern Traditional/Country Foods**

by Russel Shearer, Director, Northern Science and Contaminants Research, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada and Eric Loring, Senior Environmental Researcher, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK)

The Northern Contaminants Program studies contaminants that are transported to the Arctic over long distances from other parts of the world. Once deposited in the Arctic, these contaminants remain in the environment and can also build up in the food chain at levels high enough to be toxic to humans and animals. The NCP is managed by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada in partnership with Health Canada, Environment Canada, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, the territorial governments of the Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut, and four Northern Aboriginal organizations – Council of Yukon First Nations, Dene Nation, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, and Inuit Circumpolar Conference.

One of the central goals of the NCP is to communicate information to Northerners to support informed decision-making on traditional food use and their health. The NCP strives to provide information in an accessible, balanced and meaningful way and invests significant time and resources into communications and education on contaminants in the North.

To facilitate two-way communication and exchange, a network has developed under the NCP in each of the regions and territories. This network links communities and individuals to the regional/territorial level and then to the national program structure and beyond. Territorial Contaminants Committees (TCCs) in each region / territory are central to this network, and are comprised of a broad spectrum of regional experts. These committees focus on regionally-specific concerns and issues and help shape the way research is conducted. The strong partnership between the NCP and its Aboriginal Partners (Council of Yukon First Nations, Dene Nation, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, and Inuit Circumpolar Conference) is vital to the delivery and exchange of information. In many cases, these Aboriginal organizations take the lead on communications activities.

The NCP remains committed to developing new and innovative strategies to engage Northerners on contaminants issues. Over the years, the NCP has used a variety of communication processes to deliver information and engage communities on the contaminants issue, including community tours, frontline training courses, educational material development, and translation projects. Recently, the focus has shifted from simple information delivery to developing a network of people and organizations in the North that can effectively communicate and simplify the often complex concepts of contaminants and traditional/country foods. As part of this shift, there is a renewed sense that the NCP needs to invest in capacity building in the North in order to keep these networks alive. Already a crucial part of the network, the TCCs and other Aboriginal and Northern Partners also help to put contaminants messages in the proper context for their regions. The NCP will continue to develop new strategies to engage northerners on contaminants issues.