

Opinion: Conservation investigators posing as researchers is arrogant folly

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Details revealed of a months-long sting operation by Environment ministry officials suggest that the

pursuit of an illegal fishing case against an Indigenous man was overzealous and culturally insensitive, and damaging to trust relationships academic researchers have established over decades with Indigenous communities in northern Saskatchewan.

Donald Iron was found guilty in provincial court in January of selling small quantities of fish on four occasions between February 2017 and September 2018 without a commercial fishing licence to a conservation officer posing as an air quality scientist.

The ruse involved the officer visiting Iron once or twice a month between June 2016 and October 2017, ostensibly to inspect and maintain fake air quality monitoring equipment he had placed on the man's property and engaging him in chats about fish and fishing.

It wasn't until last week, when the CBC had a publication ban on the case lifted, that certain details came to light, including the fact that it took Iron eight months after first encountering the officer to make good on a promise to have some fish for him.

On that occasion, Iron handed over a bag with two pike fillets and asked for a package of cigarettes in return. Instead, the officer offered him \$10, the amount Iron said was the cost of cigarettes. The three subsequent occasions of "marketing fish" occurred along similar lines, all of it for a paltry \$90 in total.



Certainly, the ministry was correct to investigate complaints it says it has received about Iron for 20 years.

Yet given the circumstances, where it took the undercover officer seven months to establish trust and “friendship” with an illiterate, impoverished man who then asked for a pack of smokes in exchange for two pike fillets, surely officials knew that they weren’t dealing with a sophisticated poaching operation.

From the judge who castigated Iron, saying people who take more fish than they need to feed themselves and then illegally sell the fish are stealing from their communities, to the ministry officials who doggedly pursued the case against Iron, what seems to be lacking is an understanding or appreciation of northern culture and traditions.

In an informative paper, [A Righteous Undocumented Economy](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10551-018-3878-2) (<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10551-018-3878-2>), associate professor Lee Swanson at the Edwards School of Business in the University of Saskatchewan explains the findings of a study of seven remote northern Saskatchewan communities.

Among other findings, the paper reveals a largely undocumented social and economic system based on traditional practices, with traditional foods acquired through hunting, fishing and gathering traded for goods purchased in stores or exchanged for services.

Such informal economic exchanges may not seem rational to those outside these northern Indigenous communities, but for many Indigenous people, it's a fact of subsistence and survival.

It's the work of researchers such as Swanson, and any number of other academics such as Greg Poelzer and Bram Noble at U of S who've spent most of their careers engaged in research in northern communities that helps us understand Indigenous traditions, ways of life and aspirations for the future, and paves the way for reconciliation and growth.

Poelzer and Noble, along with many of their research colleagues, are rightly disturbed at the tactic used in this case, noting that it destroys the trust relationship for anyone working in the North with Indigenous communities.

"If it was the other way, with scientists posing as conservation officers to gather data, it would be considered highly unethical and unacceptable," notes Noble.

What's particularly grating is the comment by a ministry official, Bill Zimmer, quoted in a CBC story saying similar cases could be handled the same way in the future.

His response to researchers' concerns — that he doesn't think undercover operations would undermine their efforts to build relationships, and scientists should provide credentials to prove their identity — is the kind of gob-smacking arrogance that no one should tolerate.

If Environment officials can't see the folly of their actions, the minister needs to step in.

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