Climate change and the resulting effects on the environment can have serious impacts on human health and wellbeing. These include increased risk of food- and water-borne disease, higher frequency of diseases transmitted by insects and other animals (for example, malaria), increased injury and death from extreme weather, and increased occurrence of respiratory and cardiac diseases as a result of changing air quality. Most of the research on climate change and health has focused on the effects on physical health, but new research is highlighting the relationship between environmental change and emotional and mental wellbeing. Indigenous populations often disproportionately experience the effects of climate change. In Canada’s North, the Inuit people are experiencing rapid and significant environmental changes, which are impacting their ability to take part in traditional “land-based” activities such as fishing, hunting, trapping, and travelling on the ice and snow. These changes to the natural landscape also affect an individual’s and a community’s sense of “place” – their connection and attachment to the land.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 72 residents from the Inuit community of Rigolet, Nunatsiavut, Labrador, including all ages and backgrounds. Each interviewee was asked about the climate and environmental changes they had witnessed in the past decade; the social, cultural, and economic impacts of these changes; and the link between environmental change and health. Based on these interviews, common themes were identified by the research team, which was comprised of Inuit and non-Inuit researchers. A survey was also completed by 112 residents, which looked at the various impacts of environmental change, including regarding the residents’ connection to the land.

In the Inuit community of Rigolet, Nunatsiavut, Labrador, the environmental effects of climate change include changing weather and ice conditions and shifts in wildlife and vegetation patterns. When residents are unable to carry out traditional “on-the-land” activities, their connection to the land and emotional well-being are negatively impacted.
What did the researchers find?

According to Rigolet residents, over the past decade there have been changes to weather and storm patterns, decreasing ice quality and stability, changes to snowfall, and shifts in wildlife and vegetation patterns. The vast majority of residents reported having a deep connection to and love of the land, as well as a deep sense of identity fostered by the land. Residents reported that moving away from traditional foods and activities has had negative impacts on physical health, while the changing landscape and inability to carry out traditional cultural practices on the land has had harmful effects on emotional wellbeing.

How can you use this research?

Environment-health and climate-health researchers can further this research by considering emotional health and a sense of place when looking at the impacts of environmental and climate change on community wellbeing.

Government health agencies can use this research to better understand how environmental change can negatively affect physical and mental health, particularly in communities that have a strong historical and cultural attachment to the land.

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