

Comments on Background Document; Section 1. Guiding Concepts
Document 1-7, Drawing on Aboriginal Wisdom by Joanne Barnaby, Hay River, NWT

from

Duane Pendergast, Computare, Sunday, February 29, 2004

A passage from this document stands out as a focal point which could help bring the NWMO to completion of its task in 2005. Grand Chief Mathew Coon Come is quoted as saying; “Our elders advise us that we should think of the impact of our actions seven generations hence. Nowhere is this truer than with respect to the creation and disposal of nuclear waste.”

This “traditional knowledge” seems a reasonable compromise between our tradition of looking ahead two or three generations, and the often stated position in the background papers on the NWMO website that nuclear technology demands we look ahead with great clarity for 400 to 4000 generations.

Humans are allotted about 100 years of life at best - four generations by the definition of the NWMO’s first discussion document. We instinctively and consciously value our lives and endeavor to protect ourselves, others, and our environment, from clear present and imminent danger. Our economic culture recognizes our focus on our little window on time. We borrow money, paying interest, to help ensure our immediate lifetime needs are met. Similarly, the future value of all kinds of assets, including the environment, is discounted to reflect the fact their usefulness to anyone is increasingly uncertain with continuing exposure to the risks posed by our dangerous world and the uncertainty of future events. Our collectively modest concern for the future much beyond our lifetimes is understandable and practical. Indeed, many would consider this preoccupation with the living an ethical approach and would suggest we pay even more attention to helping less fortunate fellow humans.

Many of the background papers seem to assume, with very little questioning, that those living now should be highly preoccupied with protecting far future generations from radioactive and poisonous materials. It is implied we should stop our seemingly instinctive discounting of the future value of our environment. The papers are peppered with assumptions such as “no moral basis exists for discounting future health and risks of environmental damage” and “use of discount rates only for commodities, not for human or environmental welfare.” These statements seem to imply that we can project earth’s current condition some one million years into the future. Looking backward suggests such projections are questionable. In fairness there is discussion of balancing the needs of present generations with future generations. Professor [Timmerman](#) seems to raise some doubts about valuing the future as the present, but readers are left with considerable doubt with respect to his beliefs. Ian [Duncan](#) notes that most of the public has a time horizon of at most 100 years. He suggests “most people are uncomfortable with concepts that are very long-lived and could impact adversely on future generations.” Is it possible, instead, that they are uncomfortable admitting they don’t really care a lot about future generations? In the face of this conflict the “seven generation” outlook seems the basis for a

common sense approach that will resonate with the public and the technical proposals to be considered.

One of the NWMO workshops ([Future Scenarios](#)) has taken the “seven generation” concept into consideration. The scenarios are based on giving consideration to four time horizons: 25 years (1 generation); 175 years (7 generations); 500 years (20 generations) and 10,000 years (400 generations). Several issues mentioned in the documentation on the NWMO website will become much clearer in the next 175 years. We will have a much better appreciation of the importance of our oil supplies and the possible need for alternative energy. We will likely know if our concerns about global warming are significant and manageable. We will better understand the effects of low doses of radiation on human and environmental health as brought up by John [Sutherland](#) and Jerry [Cutler](#).

I’m anticipating that the NWMO will come to full appreciation of the seven generation traditional wisdom as progress is made toward the recommendations expected of it by November 2005.