



**sensory
acts**

More than Human Communication
in the Circumpolar North

SACTS 2023 Annual Report, Year 1 of 5 (April 1, 2022 – March 31, 2023)
Sensory Acts: More than Human Communication in the Circumpolar North

Alex Oehler & Sarah Abbott, June 8, 2023

This report outlines activities and events conducted by the SACTS project research team during our first year of SSHRC funding. While we tried to line up our activities with the goals set out in our funding proposal timeline, there exists some divergence between the two, in part due to changes in field site locations that emerged from the ongoing invasion of the Russian Federation in Ukraine.

Funding and Field site Adjustments (Ongoing)

We received SSHRC's Notice of Award in March 2022. The total approved amount of funding was \$344,497 instead of the requested \$382,774. This created a budgetary deficit of \$38,277.¹ Initially our proposed research focused on at least two field sites in southern Siberia (Ak Erik in Tes-Khem, Tyva and Sorok in Okinskii Rai'on, Buriatia), where Alex Oehler (PI) and Victoria Peemot (Collaborator) have long-standing community ties. Most of the more involved research aspects for SACTS (e.g., wolf and yak collaring, reindeer herding apprenticeship) were to be carried out in Okinski Rai'on in the westernmost part of the Republic of Buriatia. With the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation (RF), and following international sanctions imposed on the RF, all Canadian researchers were prevented from conducting work in the RF and/or with partner institutions in the RF. This required our team to rethink field sites, including research objectives, several of which had been designed for specific and prepared settings in Siberia.

Shifting the project research focus from Siberia to the Canadian Arctic helps us manage part of the \$38,277 deficit. The Western Canadian Arctic field site can be reached by vehicle, which will lower travel costs by up to \$7,720 per trip if four individuals travel together. This can potentially allow for more frequent field site visits (car pool gas mileage return trip is \$4,080 vs. \$11,800 for air tickets, Regina-Inuvik) and reduce budgetary expenditures. It is unlikely that we will be able to collar wolves and/or reindeer in the Northwest Territories (NWT). Our research aim in collaring was based on herder route planning. In the NWT this may not apply in the same way as anticipated for research in Siberia. Cutting satellite collars allows us to save \$19,200 (\$12,000 collars + \$7,200 collaring). In Siberia we intended to hire an Elder-herder trainer for 10 months

¹ Ironically, one of the external reviewers of our SSHRC IG application commented that if the review committee were to cut our proposed budget, the most innovative objectives of our project (reindeer apprenticeship and satellite collaring) would likely not be accomplished. This has now proven to be accurate, albeit for more than one reason.

and purchase 10 reindeer. In the NWT we cannot follow this format because Inuvialuit reindeer herders practice large-scale far-range herding. Abandoning this particular herder/apprentice feature will save another \$15,000. Closing our Siberian sites generates savings of up to \$34,200, which falls \$4,077 short of extinguishing the deficit.

Website (April – May 2022)

In April 2022, we designed a logo for the project (see header) and in May we launched the SACTS project website (www.sensoryacts.ca). Oehler designed the logo and website. We hosted the site on a Canadian server in Montreal for \$273.32 for the first three years, which came out of Oehler's University of Regina (UR) Startup Fund. The website has become the landing site for this project and it is frequented by people from around the world with an interest in our research. It has already proven helpful as a way for others to get in touch with us.

Regular Meetings (Ongoing)

Oehler (PI) and Sarah Abbott (CI) met on a bi-weekly basis for much of the year to discuss project particulars, planning and progress, networking, publications, conference organising, and presentations, and graduate student research, recruitment and training. In connection with these meetings and outside them, SACTS written materials were discussed. Oehler took the lead on writing proposals, applications, reports, etc. and Abbott contributed with feedback, additional content, and editing. Abbott took the lead on drafting and coordinating the call for MA/MFA students in association with SACTS (see below).

SACTS Reading Group (September 2022 – March 2023)

As per our project proposal, we started an international monthly (2-hour) virtual (Zoom) reading group, open to scholars, researchers, practitioners (including artists) and students. We maintain a list of participants and interested parties and their email addresses. To date, 43 people have joined the list. Over the first year, we met six times (September, October, December 2022; January, February, March 2023), with attendance ranging from 5 to 16 participants per session. During these meetings, we follow and discuss a pre-circulated list of topics, authors and project research questions related to the readings. Four of the meetings were hosted by Oehler, two were hosted by Abbott. Information about past and upcoming sessions are available on the SACTS website. Themes and readings were predominantly curated by Oehler with input from Abbott. We discussed the following topics:

SACTS-RG #001: Scent 1 - Mapping with Granö's Nose

SACTS-RG #002: Scent 2 - Does Scent Defeat Language

SACTS-RG #003: Perception 1: Uexküll Then and Now

SACTS-RG #004: Perception 2: Taking Uexküll to Task

SACTS-RG #005: Thought 1: What did Bateson Leave Us With?

SACTS-RG #006: Thought 2: Distributed Multispecies Cognition and Politics

Each meeting was recorded, with a note for attendee consent stated at the beginning of the recording. SACTS-RG sessions are recorded with the intention that they will be edited and released as 30-40 minute SACTS podcasts that can be accessed by other researchers, scholars, and the general public worldwide; SACTS-RG attendees have the option of requesting omission of things they said during the discussion. These podcasts are a new addition to SACTS project activities. We hope to begin editing and posting the podcasts in Year 2.

Conferences & Networking (May 2022 – March 2023)

May 2022: Oehler presented the research goals of SACTS at the Canadian Anthropology Society (CASCA) conference at the University of Regina in a presentation entitled: “Open Plants, Open Plans.” He also co-curated with Alex Ranger an art exhibition on human-animal relations at Fifth Parallel Gallery, featuring the work of Belinda Harrow and Melanie Rose in a show entitled, “Open Spaces – Close Encounters” (May 11-14, 2022).² Later, Oehler presented a talk entitled “Sentient Intermediaries” at the online *International Multispecies Methods Research Symposium: Shifting Paradigms in Human-Animal Relations* (MMRS) at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon (May 24-26, online). Abbott also presented a paper at the MMRS conference, entitled “Intuitive Interspecies Communication with Plants and Animals: Connections, Diversity, Community,” and was academic lead for the co-presented session with Sue Frager and Paul Moss, “Exploring the connection between Intuitive Interspecies Communication with Animals and IC with Plants, Stones, and Other Beings.”³

June/July 2022: Abbott gave a keynote address, “Somatic Awareness for Interspecies Communication, Collaboration, and Equitable Relations with the Vegetal World” at the *Sentient Performativities: Thinking Alongside the Human* conference hosted by art.earth, Dartington Trust (Dartington Arts School & Schumacher College) and Bath Spa University in Totnes, England (June 27, online). Oehler gave a paper, “‘Noch Nicht’ OR ‘Doch Nicht’?: A Hopeful Discourse on Semiotic Spaces” at the European Association of Anthropologists (EASA) conference in Belfast (July 26-29, online). The goal of this paper was to explore ways in which the Greimas Square could be used to explore human-animal relationships.

September/October 2022: Oehler traveled to France to meet with SACTS team member Charlotte Marchina to discuss ongoing research collaborations, and to assess the research potential of the library at BULAC in Paris. This trip was funded by the French Embassy to Canada. Oehler presented on “Heritage Beyond Words: Acts of Nonverbal Decolonization,” presenting SACTS goals to members of the Raising Indigenous Voices in Academia and Society (RIVAS22) conference in Missoula, Montana, USA (October 20-25, online). Abbott attended the short residential course, “Ancient, Venerable and Large Old Trees,” at the Oak Springs Garden Foundation in Upperville, Virginia (October 11-5).

² Oehler led organisation of the annual CASCA conference held at the UR in 2023.

³ Abbott and Oehler were consulted by MMRS conference academic lead/organiser, MJ Barrett (University of Saskatchewan) for input regarding the 2022 and 2023 conferences and related presentations between the conferences in April and October 2022.

November/December 2022: Abbott, as an invited guest speaker by Campion College, UR, gave a talk titled “Perspectives on Earth Care and Interconnection” (November 24); she donated her speaking honorarium to launch the Environmental Impact Award scholarship for Campion students. Oehler traveled to Sapporo University, Japan to present on “Inner Asian Alpine and Subalpine Pastoralism in a Soiot Context” in the Panel on Hunting, Fishing and Herding in Northern Cash Economy at the Slavic-Eurasian Research Center (December 14-17). Here he met with members of the research staff from Arctic Centre in Finland.

March 2023: Oehler and SACTS team member Victoria Peemot co-organized the panel “Beyond Speech: Toward a Northern Sensory Ecology of Animals, Plants, and Humans” at the *Relations and Beyond* conference of the Finnish Anthropological Society (FAS) in Rovaniemi, Finland (March 21-23), where they also met with members of Arctic Centre. Oehler presented a paper on “Interdisciplinary Prospects for the Study of Nonverbal Interspecies Communication,” and Peemot presented a paper on, “Spiraea Söösken: its Status, Use, and Place in Land-based Human-nonhuman Kinship.” Abbott had different papers accepted for three separate panels at the FAS conference but was not able to attend.

Hiring of Graduate Researchers

On April 30, 2022, we advertised widely for two MA or MFA research student positions within or between the Department of Anthropology and/or the Faculty of Media, Art, and Performance (MAP) at the UR. Each position was to be funded \$12,000 over two years (total of \$48,000). On May 10, 2022, the UR’s Faculty of Graduate Studies & Research accepted Pradeep Ranjan Doley Barman and Alesha Stark into the Department of Anthropology. They subsequently joined SACTS as graduate research students and are supervised by Oehler. Abbott is a member of Barman’s committee.

Starting January 21, 2023 and ending December 31, 2024, each researcher (Barman and Stark) will have earned \$21,242.40 plus holiday pay (2001 hours @ \$21.20), coming out of SACTS funds. In November 2022, Oehler requested a Release for Research Funds Prior to Ethics Review in order to pay graduate researcher salaries. The application was approved. With our SACTS field sites still to be determined, we were not in a position to advertise and commit to a PhD researcher. We will be looking for a doctoral candidate in the coming year.

Training of Graduate Researchers

In the Fall 2022 term, Barman and Stark took Abbott’s course, MAP 804 Ethnography + Environment. They also took Oehler’s ANTH 853 Advanced Ethnographic Research (with a focus on multi-sensory ethnography). In the Winter 2023 term, both researchers took Oehler’s ANTH 890AY Advanced Theories in Posthumanist Anthropology and Dr. Susanne Kuehling’s ANTH 890 Advanced Anthropology of Gender. This academic training was aimed at preparing the candidates for SACTS-related fieldwork in the coming year. It has also informed the candidates’

SACTS-related literature researches, much of which has gone into their respective MA research proposals. Both Barman and Stark are regular participants in SACTS-RG sessions.

Community Consultations

In November 2021, Oehler reached out to a contact in Inuvik (from a previous project) to inquire about potential interest in a project on nonverbal interspecies communication.⁴ The previous project had focused on ancestral language revitalization, which is closely tied to knowledge of the land, and the ability to understand animal actions. In May and June 2022, Oehler contacted the Inuvialuit Cultural Centre (ICC) and learned they were too busy to partner with SACTS. Oehler also reached out to the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation (IRC), but the person in charge of research had left their position and it was unclear who to contact. In August 2022, Oehler contacted IRC's new Research Administration and Programs Manager, who requested a formal research proposal. Oehler submitted such a proposal on August 3, 2022. Williams then provided him contact information for Inuvik and Tuktoyaktuk Hunters & Trappers Committees (HTCs).

In August 2022, Oehler contacted the Joint Secretariat, who shared advice on the Inuvialuit Settlement Region Traditional Knowledge Research Policy and directed us to the Wildlife Management Advisory Council, the Inuvialuit Game Council (IGC), and the Aklavik HTC (AHTC). Oehler was granted a presentation slot at the in-person board meeting of the IGC for their March meeting in Inuvik. On March 9, 2023, Oehler presented to the IGC and the board agreed to co-lead the proposed SACTS project if the AHTC was to agree. This is confirmed in a Letter of Support, dated April 11, 2023. On January 24, 2023, the Aklavik HTC board meeting discussed the possibility of meeting with Oehler in person. An in-person meeting was scheduled for March, 2023. On March 13, Oehler met with the HTC in Aklavik. The Committee found his presentation favourable and agreed to co-lead the project, which was confirmed in a Letter of Support, issued March 29, 2023.

On February 21, 2023 graduate researchers Barman and Stark traveled to Prince Albert, SK to attend the Canadian Challenge dog race to meet with Canadian mushers who might be interested in collaborating with SACTS. The exploratory excursion was successful, resulting in one of the race participants to agree to host Barman's graduate fieldwork at their dog kennel near Prince Albert.

Training of SACTS Team

In June 2022, Oehler completed The Fundamentals of OCAP course,⁵ offered through Algonquin College, from the First Nations Information Governance Centre. Other members of the team will likely take the course in the following year. Other training will take place in the following year:

⁴ A detailed record of community correspondence is available upon request from the PI.

⁵ OCAP stands for Indigenous ownership, control, access and possession over data collection and use processes.

First Aid Wilderness Training, Ethics in Animal Experimentation, Animal Use Protocol, Firearms Safety Training, etc.

Additional Funding Applications

In April 2023, Oehler applied to the Humanities Research Institute Fellowship for \$5,000 in funding directed to SACTS graduate researchers and to help produce the first 10 episodes of the SACTS-RG podcast.

Research Ethics Board Application

A community agreement for co-led research with Indigenous communities has to precede any ethics review board approval and our application to the REB at the UR was not submitted before the end of the first SACTS year. In March 2023, Oehler started an application for a Territorial Research License (TRL) through Aurora Research Institute (ARI) in Inuvik. The TRL is currently awaiting SACTS REB clearance confirmation from the UR. The UR REB application was submitted by Oehler for preliminary review and comments from the Compliance Specialist via CONVERIS on May 9, 2023. Similarly, an Animal Use Protocol (AUP) form was submitted by Oehler for initial feedback and review to the Compliance Specialist, Animals and Cannabis on May 5, 2023.

Data Management

Oehler investigated data management options for the project and was advised by the research office at UR to contact Research Contract Officer. The Officer was travelling at the time, and upon return requested time to further research the requirements before offering a draft plan. At the time of writing this report, we have not yet heard back from the Officer.

First Annual Team Meeting

It proved impossible to gather all SACTS Collaborators during the final weeks and months of the first year of this project due to vastly diverse time zones. For this reason, the team agreed to conduct smaller Zoom-facilitated meetings between Oehler and/or Abbott with other team members, which would be recorded and shared for review amongst the team. The first of these recorded meetings took place on April 7, 2023 and the link to the recording was shared with all members. We will aim for subsequent meetings to follow over the first quarter in the second project year.

Research Team Adjustments

On December 16, 2022, Laura Siragusa (the linguist Collaborator on our team) announced her departure from SACTS as a result of a new professional position she had accepted elsewhere. At the time of writing this report, the gap of expertise caused by Siragusa's departure has not yet been filled.