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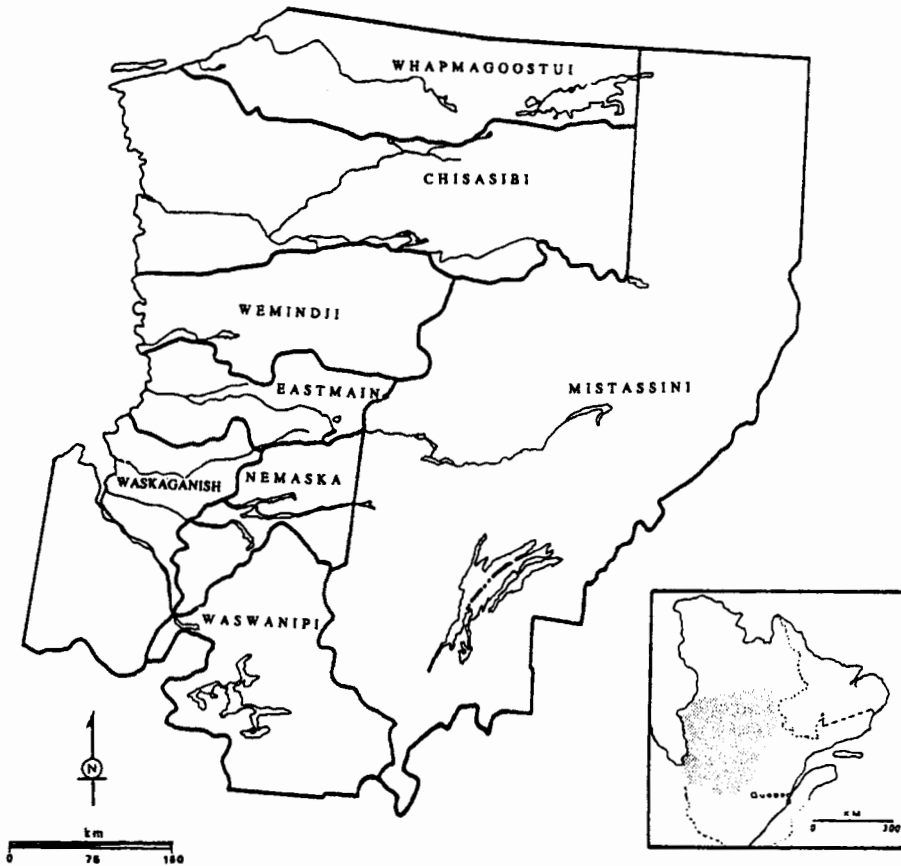
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## The Cree of James Bay, Quebec, Canada

*Harvey A. Felt*



James Bay Cree community hunting areas.

The James Bay Cree in Northern Quebec, number only 12,000 but they are known around the world for their struggles to survive the massive James Bay hydroelectric projects. Less well known are the threats they face from forestry clear-cutting, pollution of their lands, and the movement to declare the province of Quebec a country separate from Canada.

Three decades of almost continuous resistance to the destruction of their lands and the forced transformation of their culture and society have led them to the forefront of both the international indigenous rights movement and the environmental movement. Their story of successes and failures would hardly lead one to expect that nine communities of hunters, ranging in size from 550 to 3,000 people in a relatively remote area, could have such far-reaching global impacts.

### CULTURAL OVERVIEW

#### The People

The James Bay Cree are a Native American people, or First Nation as they are called in Canada. The term "First Nation" indicates that their presence preceded those of the "Founding Nations" of Canada, namely the English and French. As subarctic hunters, the James Bay Cree have cultural affinities with other First Nations occupying the band of boreal forests that stretch nearly across the full width of the North American continent.

The James Bay Cree speak dialects of Montagnais-Naskapi-Cree, an Algonquian language group, which stretches from the Montagnais on the Atlantic coast of Labrador to the Plains Cree of the western prairies. It is

one of only three indigenous languages of Canada that are spoken by enough people that its survival is not at risk.

James Bay Cree identities are also secure from the encapsulation and dominant cultures of Canadians of European descent. Identities are embedded in everyday lives, shaped profoundly by lifelong, daily, face-to-face interactions with contemporaries in small-scale communities. There is a common awareness that the Cree have survived off the food and resources they have received from the land. The Cree often find that they are most autonomous when they use the land and its resources to supplement goods, services, and knowledge from the economic markets, mass media, and government programs to which they have long been tied. Autonomy and freedom are highly valued along with hard work and constant social caring and responsibility for other community members. As the Cree society diversifies and is increasingly impacted by the dominant society, considerable efforts are being made to keep these practices.

### The Setting

The James Bay Cree live east and south of James Bay and the southern portions of Hudson Bay, in northern Canada. They have lived in this region for 9,000 years, since the last glacial ice sheet retreated from the region. This region is dominated by the cold arctic air mass in winter, but the summer weather is temperate. In the north there are open forests with stunted trees spaced fifteen to twenty feet apart and patches of open tundra. In the south there are dense coniferous forests with a high proportion of black spruce trees that reach from sixty to seventy feet in height. As a result of its position between the arctic and temperate zones, the region is characterized by some of the most variable climatic conditions in the world. As a result of the influences of the massive inland sea comprising James and Hudson bays to the west and north, the region is also characterized by exceptionally heavy snowfalls. As a result of these local conditions, there is an abundance of water on the lands to the east of James Bay; lakes and waterways make up 15 percent of the surface.

### Traditional Subsistence Strategies

Cree hunters express their responsibilities and also dependencies on the land through a series of territory stewards or "bosses." All of the more than 140,000 square miles of land on which the Cree hunt is divided into territories of from 115 to over a thousand square miles, each under the supervision and stewardship of a hunter. The steward and his spouse know the land intimately from years of use, and they decide whether it will be hunted in the coming year or whether the game need to be allowed to replenish itself. They also decide who and how many families will hunt on

the land, which game they will try to catch, and which they will allow to grow and reproduce.

Stewards know the animals of their territories well. They may know the locations of as many as 200 beaver lodges and how many adult and young male and female beaver they caught when the lodge was last trapped. Since each lodge has one mating couple, plus some one-year-old beaver and young of the year, hunters keep a record of those they have caught and have an idea which ones are still left. Usually they do not try to kill all the beaver at a lodge, but leave enough adult or yearling beaver so there will be some beaver ready to breed in the coming year. Hunters say that trapping not only helps the hunters and their families by providing them with food—beaver is a preferred meat—and income from the sale of pelts, but it helps the beaver too. When beaver are not trapped, the population of beaver grows quickly to levels that exceed the amount of quality food or the number of sites where colonies can be located, so that the health of the animals deteriorates or they fight each other for lodge sites. In this way, if hunters carefully respect the communications from beaver, then the hunters benefit from the generosity of the beaver who are willing to be killed; the beaver souls, which are reborn, benefit from having abundant food and habitat in which to lead healthy lives. Here social caring and responsibility extend in practice beyond the confines of human society to encompass humans and animals as coinhabitants of a social universe.

The Cree have organized their uses of the land to respect the needs of animals. They use wildlife selectively, hunting and harvesting different species at each season, so that they can hunt efficiently, but also so that they have different kinds of game to use if some need to be harvested in smaller numbers in any year. In the summer months, many different species of fish are the main resource for the Cree. In the fall the large migrations of waterfowl along the coast of James Bay provide a variety of geese and duck species, while moose can be readily hunted in more inland areas. In the winter, furbearers such as beaver, otter, and lynx are trapped, as well as small game—hare, grouse, and ptarmigan—and some moose are hunted in deep snow; fishing under the ice is also possible. In spring, beaver, muskrat, and fish are harvested, along with the returning waterfowl. The Cree employ a number of traditional techniques to regulate their harvests of beaver, moose, geese, and many fish species.

Even though the Cree population has grown dramatically in recent years, Cree hunters have carefully kept their wildlife harvests to levels that do not adversely affect the game populations; rather, they have increased their use of purchased foods to meet the increased food needs of a growing population. The fish and wildlife resources of James Bay are as productive and healthy today as in earlier times because of the respectful use and management exercised by Cree hunters under complex and changing circumstances.

### Social and Political Organization

The James Bay Cree emphasize egalitarianism in social relationships, and many details of everyday life are organized so as to respect the competence and needs of individuals. Even young children's wishes are taken into account when planning to move a bush camp or to organize a feast. Social life is organized around extended family groups, distant kinship ties, and bonds of friendship. Outsiders are readily incorporated into Cree social relations but are expected to engage in the extensive sharing and daily reciprocal help that express and reaffirm ties. Families are generally headed by men, who are also the main hunters, but women control much of domestic life and many community-centered organizations and institutions. In addition, any household or subsistence task can be undertaken by a man or a woman.

Despite the strong egalitarianism, the system of hunting territories recognizes a limited number of Cree as the stewards of each tract of hunting lands. Each steward has considerable authority over the uses of the land and where those who are not stewards may hunt. Stewards are generally the older, more experienced hunters. This system provides a judicious balance of leadership in hunting activities that benefit many people. When individuals abuse their leadership and serve only their own personal needs, they lose the respect of others and their instructions are not obeyed. This set of checks and balances has been incorporated into the developing political leadership patterns.

### Religion and World View

When we are out in the bush, paddling along in summer, or walking on the ice, the sensitive side of us makes us realize there is a world staring back at us. And we depend on it.

—Paul Dixon<sup>1</sup>

Cree hunters have learned to live in this complex regional environment. In their world view, humans and their societies are part of a wider social universe. The world is not so much filled with natural objects, or things, as it is made up of social beings, or persons. For them, animals are willful beings, each species with its own type of family, knowledge, habitual behavior, and personality, and each animal is God's creation and has a soul.

This way of thinking about the world not only extends to other living beings but to phenomena and objects such as snow, mountains, lightning and thunder, rocks, and lakes. In the Cree world, each of these can be an active agent and therefore just like a living being or person. A. Irving Hallowell, the anthropologist who first described the logic and beauty of this way of thinking in the 1930s, told of one occasion when he heard thunder

and an old Cree man casually asked his wife, "Did you hear what they said?"<sup>2</sup>

In this social world, all the activities, behaviors, and signs of animals and other persons are thought of as communication, not just happenings. Thus if a hunter sees signs of an animal, it tells him or her something about what that animal is thinking or feeling. When a Cree sees a moose across a lake in the summer, too far away to be hunted, the Cree may be being told by the animal that he or she will have a successful hunt for that animal in the fall when it is easier to hunt moose. When fewer fish are caught in a fishnet than usual, it may be a sign that the fish do not want to be caught in such large numbers. One observation does not tell the whole story, but if the same message comes repeatedly, and in various ways, it becomes clearer. It is not that the fishermen cannot catch more fish, they clearly can if they keep setting the net. But the fish themselves are communicating that enough—or perhaps too many—have been caught and that the fishermen should not set the net in this area for a while but leave the fish alone to let their numbers increase before fishing here again.

This way of thinking about the world is closely tied to an environmental ethic of respect and responsibility toward the environment. Cree hunters are very careful observers of their world, and the knowledge they have of the lands on which they spend a lifetime of active hunting is typically very detailed and accurate. Scientific knowledge of the region, by comparison, is fragmentary and lacks historical depth, although it too is useful when used carefully. Indeed, the Cree and scientists agree on many things. Nevertheless, Cree hunters are often surprised that knowledgeable scientists often cannot see the ethical responsibilities that flow from their knowledge of the land. They are also surprised when scientists do not respond to the damage being done by developers and government officials by advising them to stop their actions.

The great majority of Cree adopted Christianity in the early decades of the twentieth century. Most became Anglicans, some Roman Catholics, and, after mid-century, many others adopted Pentecostal denominations; others returned to non-Christian Indian religions. Whichever religion they have followed, most Cree believe in a spiritual and social world, in which animals and spirits communicate with hunters. Each of the religious traditions in James Bay has adapted to Cree belief and knowledge.

### THREATS TO SURVIVAL

#### The Effects of Early Contact with Europeans

The culture and society of the Cree have been changing throughout their long history. Long before Europeans arrived, new ideas and innovations were continually being explored and developed. Moose did not move into

the James Bay region until after 1910, and the Cree learned how to hunt and manage moose populations in only a few decades.

Change itself is thus not really a threat to the Cree. The Cree have been changing by adopting those aspects of other cultures that they valued; sometimes they have been forced to change by powerful outsiders. However, they have not become just like other North Americans—they are changing on their own trajectory, re-creating the world view, values, and practices that have shaped their lives in ways that fit new contexts and problems. They still share and value the land in a culturally distinctive manner.

Europeans first approached the Cree in search of trade routes to the Orient and later to obtain furs for trade. In the 1670s, the fur trade began in earnest with the founding of the Hudson's Bay Company. From mostly tiny trading posts established around the bay, a small cadre of traders depended on the Cree to harvest furs from the vast surrounding territories using their traditional knowledge supplemented with steel traps, hatchets, and later bait and guns acquired in trade.

The Cree organized trapping for furs as a complement to subsistence hunting, which was of necessity the primary goal. The Cree came to depend on the traders for steel tools, cloth, guns and powder, and, in the twentieth century, tea, flour, lard, and some of other foodstuffs. The traders depended on the Cree for furs and often for food supplies, companionship, and security. Traders sought ways to control the Cree and get them to bring in more furs. The Cree demanded better goods and gifts from the traders as a sign of recognition that they and the hunters were trading partners. The Cree actively defended their extensive autonomy on the land. Many Cree hunters in the 1960s thought the fur trade had been a mutually beneficial experience. Others, however, recalled relatives who had starved in the bush in the 1930s because traders had refused aid and supplies to their families when fur prices declined and they could not pay for necessities, thereby revealing the inhumanity of a profit motive without social responsibility and sharing.

The fur trade lasted for three centuries until, during the years from the 1950s to the 1970s, the Cree began to settle in the government-sponsored communities that grew up around some of the fur trading posts. Not many Cree intended to reduce significantly the amount of time they spent on the land, but they did want their children to get more education in order to deal better with the Canadians who were increasingly intruding on their lands. They were also forced by a decline in fur prices to seek more government assistance from the social welfare system, and governments used this situation to get people to stay in and near settlements where they could receive their monthly social assistance payments.

### Government Programs Introduced to Cree Communities

The governments were convinced that hunting was a dying way of life and that those who were hunters at that time would be the last generation. Development of the north would overwhelm and assimilate the hunters and provide new opportunities for the next generations to become wage laborers in the mining, forestry, and energy resource industries which would develop the north. This vision has failed on both counts. Many Cree have continued to choose a hunter's life, or they have developed other ties to the land-based economy. Northern developments have failed to provide jobs accessible or attractive to the Cree or in sufficient numbers to meet the needs of a rapidly growing population.

The improvements in health care that are available in the settlements resulted in a period of rapid population growth. This created constant stress in settlements that were continually short of funds from governments and often desperately in need of more and better housing, proper sanitation and public health services, locally controlled and designed education, and other social programs. Communities have improved slowly over time, but the Cree experience with government-initiated social and economic development planning was one of failure: failure of the government to provide basic and adequate resources comparable to those available in southern towns, failure to provide for local control, and failure to keep promises.

### Large-scale Hydroelectric Development

A crisis developed in 1971 when the province of Quebec announced it would start to build the largest hydroelectric project in North America. The province did not inform or discuss the plans with the Cree. Young Cree, who had learned English in the schools, first read about this massive development in newspapers a few days after decisions to proceed with the project had been made. A group of younger Cree from several villages began to discuss how the Cree should respond to this threat. They organized meetings of Cree leaders and elders. The elders declared that the Cree should have a voice in the project, and if they did not, they should try to stop the project. The elders were shocked at the destruction of the land and animals that would be caused by the flooding. They also proclaimed that this was part of a longer-term pattern of white men—non-Cree—deciding from elsewhere what would happen to the lands of James Bay, and that this pattern should stop.

The people are against the building of dams. The land is what they live off, and that is why they are against it. I know it's going to be bad for people with grandchildren and those yet to be born. . . . It disagrees with me from what I have seen

so far. I feel like I have been punched. . . . I have been hurt inside. . . . I never felt that way before. (Abraham Weapinacappo, Cree elder)<sup>1</sup>

Because the governments of Canada and Quebec would not negotiate with the Cree elders and the new generation of leaders, the Cree reluctantly took the province to court to claim their rights to use and occupy the land that would be irreversibly damaged if the project were built. They embarrassed the federal government into giving them funds that would allow them to make their case. This was the first of a long series of occasions on which the Cree sought to be heard by asking one government, or branch of government, to help it fight another branch of government. The Cree often have had to turn to the judicial system for partial recognition of their rights or to exploit the differences between the federal and provincial governments.

In one significant court case, with the help of a small group of lawyers, engineers, and social scientists, the Cree explained to the presiding judge how the 3,400 square miles of flooding, the more than 300 hundred miles of roads being built to construct dozens of massive dams and camps for thousands of workers needed for the La Grande hydroelectric complex, and the consequent opening of the territory for mining, forestry, and tourist developments would threaten both the land and the Cree way of life.

Two and a half years after the project was begun, and after six months of court testimony, the judge ruled in favor of the Cree and ordered the project stopped. A week later, the court of appeals took the case under review but lifted the order stopping construction while it considered the case. This was both a significant victory and an important loss. Few had expected the Cree to be able to stop the massive project at all. Having done so, even for a week, was a significant victory. The Cree had demonstrated an ability to disrupt plans in a way that could cost substantial time and money.

Many things had to be built in the brief summer period, so even short disruptions could cause long delays; Hydro-Quebec claimed in court that such delays cost it more than \$1 million a day. This was cause for concern to both the builders and the financiers because there were still at least five more court rulings to come. The province declared that it was ready to negotiate with the Cree. The victory was limited by the fact that the construction was continuing. It became increasingly clear to the Cree that if the legal process took five years to reach a final decision in the Supreme Court, the project would be almost completed, and the damages would be irreversible whatever the court decided. The Cree therefore felt they had to negotiate.

### Larger Political Threats

Quebec has been intermittently governed by a separatist political party since 1976, and two referendums have been held on the issue of whether the Quebecers wish to separate from Canada and establish a separate nation-state. The second of these referendums was won by those in favor of Canadian federalism, but by the narrowest of margins, and future referendums are promised by the separatist party forming the government in Quebec (1999). During the intensely fought separation campaign in 1995, the Cree said that, as a distinct people, if Quebecers chose independence from Canada then the Cree had a right to choose whether they would join an independent Quebec or stay in Canada. They said their lands would go with them. They asserted that they were not a colonized people who could be moved about politically by the decisions of others and that they had aboriginal rights of self-determination. Concern over the treatment of the Cree and the disposition of the extensive lands they use became an important issue in the campaign, although neither the federal nor the provincial government acknowledged Cree rights. The Cree held their own referendum and voted overwhelmingly to stay in Canada.

The campaigns, however, were highly divisive, and they have left the Cree more distant and isolated from the government and public opinion in Quebec. Their struggles for full recognition thus continue, amidst significant victories and ongoing erosions on their rights and lands. As Matthew Coon Come, the grand chief of the James Bay Cree, wrote in 1998:

The myth persists in Quebec and elsewhere in Canada, that this country consists of two founding nations or peoples, the English and the French. This fiction denies our presence, our rights and status, and our role in the history, economy, and the well-being of this country. Now, as Canada debates once more its own possible renewal or disintegration . . . it is our people and our land that is being threatened, and the Crees must be heard.<sup>4</sup>

### Ongoing Challenges

The agreement has helped strengthen both full-time and part-time Cree hunting; it has enhanced Cree control of community life and institution; and it has given the Cree some economic autonomy. The process has also strengthened the Cree politically by building leadership skills and organizations.

The negotiated agreement has also failed in important ways. Both levels of government have failed to provide adequate resources to implement many provisions of the agreement. Many Cree lands have not been fully surveyed and marked, nearly twenty-five years after the agreement was signed. The region is still being treated as an uncontrolled resource frontier

by corporations in a global economic system that seeks cheap access to resources without concern for conservation or regional development. The agreement has failed to protect the Cree from resource developments in part because the environmental impact assessment procedures have been repeatedly undermined or not applied by both the federal and provincial governments. For example, the government of Quebec has facilitated rapid and unsustainable cutting of the forests of the region. It has justified this by saying the rapid cutting is needed to clear timber from areas that will be reservoirs if future hydroelectric projects are built, but whether the hydroelectric projects that would require these reservoirs will ever be built is very much in doubt. One result of this unregulated forestry is that up to 90 percent of the forested land on some Cree hunting territories has been clear-cut, rendering the steward's lands effectively unusable.

The economic development aspects of the agreement have not been implemented by the governments either. Few Cree were willing to work on the hydroelectric project; only five Cree worked there in 1998. The Cree have not been allowed access to the tourism opportunities that were promised. They are also denied access to modest commercial fisheries or adequate forestry resources which they could carefully manage to provide jobs for the growing numbers of Cree youth who cannot be supported by full-time hunting or by service jobs within Cree communities.

The Cree therefore entered the 1990s as a society still tied to the land and a distinctive culture, as well as a society with an experienced and strengthened leadership and self-governing organizations and resources. They also found their lands and culture under continuing and expanded threats; they found that development has not benefited their communities; and today they are engaged in struggles that are very much like those they were fighting twenty years ago.

#### RESPONSE: STRUGGLES TO SURVIVE CULTURALLY

We feel, as Cree People, that by coming to an Agreement . . . that it is the best way to see that our rights and that our land are protected as much as possible from the white man's intrusion. . . . We have always said that we wanted to maintain our way of life. . . . I hope you can all understand our feelings, that this has been a tough fight, and our people are still very much opposed to the project, but they realize that they must share the resources.

—Billy Diamond, grand chief of the Grand Council of the Cree, 1974<sup>5</sup>

If I had known in 1975 what I know now [1990] about the way solemn commitments become twisted and interpreted, I would have refused to sign the Agreement.

—Billy Diamond, Cree grand chief.<sup>6</sup>

#### Negotiating a Land Claim Agreement

For two years, the Cree negotiated with the provincial and federal governments and with Hydro-Quebec and the other crown (government) corporations that were developing the territory. During that time, the Cree developed a regional association, the Grand Council of the Cree, which united the older and younger leadership of the nine Cree communities and provided essential services the communities alone were unable to undertake. A new regional society emerged from these collaborations, based on the ties that had formerly been established when Cree from different areas would meet at the fur trading posts to sell their fur, but also based on the more recently created ties among the younger generation of Cree who had gone to school together. New communications, joint decision making, and a new regional leadership recognized by all communities were developed in this process.

In some ways, the new political organization reflects the councils formed in each community when the Cree moved into the settlements in the 1950s and 1960s, and it also reflects patterns of hunting territory stewardship. For example, each community gave to the regional organization the mandates it wished to share, and the group tended to give to the communities most affected by a particular choice the main voice in how that decision should be made.

The negotiations with the governments and their development corporations did not provide the Cree with a just or satisfactory settlement. Nevertheless, the Cree were convinced that they had obtained the most they could through the negotiation process and that with the project being built they might be better served by this partial victory than if they allowed developments to go forward without any effective control. This compromise was a very difficult decision to take, and the leadership and communities debated it at length, but in the end they voted almost unanimously in favor of the agreement that had been negotiated.

The Cree, the governments, and the Inuit people of farther north in Quebec—formerly known as the Eskimo—who were also affected by one part of the project, together signed the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement in November 1975. It was the first modern treaty signed in Canada. The agreement prohibited Hydro-Quebec from making future extensions of the hydroelectric project without Cree consent; it required some modest modifications to existing plans; and it provided for some programs to remedy those impacts of the project that could be offset, such as improving access to the reservoirs. While the initial La Grande phase of hydroelectric development went ahead largely as it had been planned, new development projects were made subject to social and environmental assessments and regulations.

The governments recognized the Cree rights to hunt on all their ancestral lands, subject only to joint conservation. The Cree control only the 1.5 percent of the land around their communities, and most of the territory was therefore open for development by outsiders. Cree set up their own education and health boards under the agreement, as well as new local and regional governments. They also received cash compensation for damages caused by the projects, which initially totaled \$150 million, but now exceed half a billion dollars owing to supplementary agreements resulting from various project modifications.

### Support for Cree Subsistence

Our economy is often criticized by those who do not understand, called primitive and old-fashioned. I want you to know it is the best economy in the world. . . . Well, the Cree have survived for thousands of years on hunting, fishing, and trapping. Tell me about another economic system that provided that kind of stability for thousands of years without interruption. The Cree people do not want to give up hunting, fishing, and trapping for an uncertain future. . . . Can Hydro-Quebec guarantee to feed and shelter the Cree people for another 5,000 years? You can see that it is impossible to pay people to give up their way of life, when they depend on the land.

—Edward Gilpin, Jr.<sup>7</sup>

To support hunters, a special program was created in 1975 to provide income security payments to full-time hunters, giving them and their spouses the equivalent of a wage for each day they spent hunting. This was necessary because the prices of furs were unsteady and the costs of hunting were rising; many who wanted to hunt did not have the cash to outfit themselves with basic equipment and supplies. The program has led to more people being able to hunt than ever before and for longer periods. Today, nearly all Cree hunt, and full-time hunters account for about one-quarter of the booming population, not all of whom could be supported full-time on the land.

About one-third of the Cree have regular jobs, but nearly all Cree say hunting and living on the land are vital parts of their lives, and they spend considerable effort and money to hunt and live in the bush part-time. They often hunt on evenings, during weekends, on holidays, and during fall and spring hunting breaks of several weeks when schools and local governments close and the settlements are virtually empty. Cree villages are therefore clearly still hunting communities, but they are on a course of development distinctive to the Cree. Jobs are organized to provide cash incomes but also to provide extensive opportunities for land-based living and hunting.

While the initial compromises made by the Cree in order to gain some degree of control over these development projects did not solve the conflicts

at the root of the threats to their land and their culture, the Cree themselves were strengthened by the process of challenging and negotiating with governments and developers. There was a sense of enhanced power from implementing the self-government provisions they had negotiated and, for example, developing schools and health care facilities under Cree control. Cree communities became more vibrant and self-sufficient as people regained control of essential services and a younger generation has grown up with a renewed confidence that they can expand and achieve yet new forms of self-sufficiency.

### Diversifying the Local Economy

The Cree also used some of the compensation funds they received to start or to purchase several businesses, including a regional airline, a construction company that builds houses and community buildings in Cree villages and a food and dry goods distributor to supply the stores and restaurants in the villages. Other new businesses developed in the villages include grocery and hardware stores, restaurants, taxi services, gas stations, and small bakeries and other enterprises located in people's houses. These depend on a strong sense of both individual autonomy and community service, values at the heart of the hunting culture that now serve the Cree well while they live in permanent villages.

### Building Alliances at Home and Abroad

In 1989, when Hydro-Quebec announced that it would start seeking environmental and social assessment and approvals to build a new hydroelectric project on the Great Whale River, there were divisions within the Cree communities. Some Cree thought it was a chance to strengthen the agreement and get the additional funds needed to improve social and economic conditions in the villages. Other Cree said the hydroelectric project had to be stopped because it had already flooded too much land, damaged wildlife, and threatened Cree culture. However, when Whapmagoostui, the Cree village at the mouth of the Great Whale River, declared that it did not want the project to go ahead, other communities and leaders united behind them. This time the Cree said their position was not, as it had been for the earlier project, "Don't build without our consent," it was "Don't build the Great Whale project." The immediate goal was to prevent the start of construction: to fight before the land was being destroyed.

Cree leaders realized that Hydro-Quebec had spent over \$20 billion on the already-constructed La Grande complex, and that the corporation was dependent on international capital markets to raise the funds needed to continue expanding. A key to Hydro-Quebec's plan to convince potential investors that this was a safe and profitable place for their capital was to

have an assured market for the sale of the electricity it produced. It did this partly by negotiating for large export contracts for the sale of electricity with Maine, Vermont, and New York state electric utility companies. The Cree realized that, if they could block these contracts, they would undermine some of the economic justification for the project and make it harder or more expensive for Hydro-Quebec to borrow the capital it needed to go ahead. The challenge was for a relatively small indigenous people to make its voice heard in another country and in the world financial centers.

Fortunately for the Cree, some groups in the United States were beginning to question whether their electric utility companies really needed large additional amounts of electricity and, indeed, whether increased energy consumption was environmentally or economically sound. The Cree met with these groups and told them that while Hydro-Quebec argued its energy was nonpolluting, reliable, and renewable, this was not the whole story. Hydroelectricity, the Cree said, flooded massive land areas; destroyed wildlife and habitats; threatened Cree livelihoods, health, and culture; and ignored Cree rights. The Cree also argued against the U.S. utility companies which stated that their responsibilities ended at the international border. The Cree told them that they were exporting environmental destruction and the social costs of producing electricity to Cree lands when they purchased electricity from Hydro-Quebec.

A relatively rapid victory was achieved in Maine, and the Cree decided to undertake a campaign in the other states in cooperation with local organizations. To publicize their campaign, the two communities located at the mouth of the Great Whale River—one Cree and one Inuit—built a combination canoe and kayak—the odayak—to travel from James Bay through Vermont to New York City for Earth Day 1990. When they arrived in New York City, Grand Chief Matthew Coon Come addressed the massive audience near the tip of Manhattan Island and near the Wall Street financial district, “Hydro-electric development is flooding the land, destroying the wildlife and killing our people, and eventually we will all be victims”<sup>8</sup> Robbie Dick, the chief of the Cree community at the mouth of the Great Whale River, told the audience that the developers “are telling the Americans this is cheap and clean. But it’s not cheap for us. When you turn on your switch, you’re killing us.”<sup>9</sup>

Environmental organizations helped the Cree at each daily stop along the way during their travels. Not all environmentalists supported the Cree, and not all Cree were comfortable working with environmentalists. In addition, animal rights groups were pushing for a ban on the sale of fur pelts, a vital source of income for the Cree hunters, and critical to many indigenous hunters’ ability to still live on and protect the land. It seemed a contradiction to the Cree to form an alliance with groups whose antitrapping campaigns aimed to undermine the Cree’s own respectful and moral



Overnight camp near the Ottawa River during the fall, in an area that will be flooded if the third phase of the James Bay hydroelectric project is built.

relationship to game and land in the name of a new animal rights ethic that took no account of other cultures and other ways of life.

### Researching Other Options

The Cree knew that if they were to make a convincing case they had to show that there was an alternative. They paid energy experts to do a series of studies that showed that energy conservation could save more energy than the Great Whale project would produce—at less cost. Studies also showed that the contract the New York state utility was entering into to purchase electricity from Quebec was financially disadvantageous to the state, because energy prices had been dropping. The Cree also commissioned public opinion polls that showed declining public support in the United States for megaprojects. These results were not lost on U.S. politicians. The New York contract was subsequently canceled by the state utility.

Quebec still wanted authorization for the project, so it submitted 10,000 pages of impact assessment documents to the review boards established by the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement. Because the governments



tried to weaken the stringency of the review process, the Cree took three court actions to ensure that these were serious environmental and social impact reviews. The Cree argued that these documents did not answer the basic questions—that their purpose was to reassure the public rather than provide essential information for a decision. The board asked Hydro-Quebec to undertake more thorough reviews. A short time later, the premier of Quebec announced that the Great Whale project was stopped and would be delayed indefinitely. It was an extraordinary victory for the Cree and for the Inuit to their north who had joined with them to stop the Great Whale Project.

### Expanding Horizons

The James Bay Cree had become leaders in the struggle to gain national and international recognition for the rights of indigenous peoples. With part of the interest from the compensation funds they had received, the Cree have aided other aboriginal peoples who did not have the resources to defend themselves against the exploitation and destruction of their lands by other development projects. The Grand Council of the Cree was also the first indigenous organization to gain recognition as a nongovernmental organization at the United Nations. The Cree leadership found that publicity at the international level was one of the important ways to embarrass and pressure governments in Canada to fulfill more of the obligations they had taken under the treaty. Regional Cree leaders also played an active role at the United Nations in Geneva preparing the draft of the first global International Covenant on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This international accord is now being considered for adoption by UN agencies.

### FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The system that right now runs this country is a small group of people . . . managed by multinational corporations who feed into the system. That's why it is corrupt.

I still have faith in the people, I still have—to a certain extent—faith in the courts to stop certain mega-projects. Because the way they are built now is unacceptable. And we think we can change that.

—Grand Chief Matthew Coon Come, Grand Council of the Cree<sup>10</sup>

While Cree leaders and people struggle for the recognition from governments and corporations that they have a right to control their future, Cree lives, culture, and economies are being rebuilt daily by collective Cree efforts on the land and in the communities. The value of the land to all Cree unites their politicians, the Cree hunters, those Cree with steady jobs—

most of whom who hunt part-time—and the growing number of Cree youth most of whom envisage their futures as being based both in the villages and on the land. While jobs are in short supply, and political struggles periodically unify people, the hunting way of life provides a key point of shared value and experience that underpins unity on a daily basis. The other unifying factor is the desire and the active practice of Cree to look after their own communities. Despite serious problems of an inadequate number of jobs—especially among youth—and social ills, Cree villages are socially vibrant because people increasingly find the means to deal with community problems from within their own values, history, and systems of sharing and caring.

### Questions

1. What are some of the ways the James Bay Cree have been able to use the values and principles of their hunting way of life to organize their lives in the settlements and the regional politics among their villages?
2. Do you think that Cree society can continue to create lives for Cree youth that combine living in settlements with a life on the land without becoming assimilated? Why or why not?
3. Why are development projects initiated by governments and by global corporations so threatening to Cree lands and ways of life? In what ways have the Cree succeeded in limiting the impacts on their lands and lives from such projects? In what ways have they not succeeded?
4. What are the ways that the Cree have found to fight government decisions within their own country? What ways have they found to carry their struggles internationally and to global financial centers? What material resources and what kinds of knowledge have been critical to the Cree efforts to pursue these struggles?
5. The Cree and the environmentalists share a profound concern for the environment, but they do not always agree. What could environmentalists learn from the Cree about caring for the land? Would it enhance their ability to work together?

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6. Billy Diamond, "Villages of the Damned," *Arctic Circle* 1, no. 3 (1990): 28.

7. In Laurent Lepage and François Blanchard (eds.), *Analyse de contenu des audiences publiques "Grande Baleine": études exploratoire*, Montreal: Hydro Québec 1992, 102.

8. Quoted in Michael Posluns, *Voices from the Odeyak* (Toronto: NC Press, 1993), 32.

9. Quoted in *ibid.*, 33.

10. Interview. "Matthew Coon Coome's [sic] Lonely Fight for Democracy," *Nativebeat* 1, no. 9 (1991): 15.

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*The Nation*. A bimonthly James Bay Cree regional magazine edited by young Cree. Beesum Communications, 5678 Park Ave. P.O. Box 48036, Montreal, Canada H2V 4S8. Tel: 514-272-3077; fax: 514-278-9914; Web-site: <http://www.beesum-communications.com>.

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*Flooding Job's Garden*, 1991. 57 minutes. National Film Board of Canada (co-produced with Tamarack Productions, in association with TVOntario and with the collaboration of TV5).

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### Internet and WWW Sites

Arctic Circle on the James Bay Cree (school oriented)  
<http://arcticcircle.uconn.edu/CulturalViability/Cree>

Air Creebec (Cree Airline)  
<http://aircreebec.ca>

Cree-Naskapi Commission (Ottawa)  
<http://www.atride.net/cnc/>

Grand Council of the Crees (Eeyou Istchee)  
<http://www.gcc.ca>

Hudson Bay Region  
<http://www.sierraclub.org/ecoregions/hudsonbay.htm>

James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement  
<http://www.inac.gc.ca/jbnqa/index.htm>

Mistassini Cree First Nation  
<http://nation.mistassini.gc.ca/index.htm>

Oujebougamau Cree First Nation  
<http://www.ouje.ca/welcome/chief.htm>

School Net on Aboriginal Peoples  
<http://www.schoolnet.ca/aboriginal/index2-e.html>

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School Net on Aboriginal Peoples  
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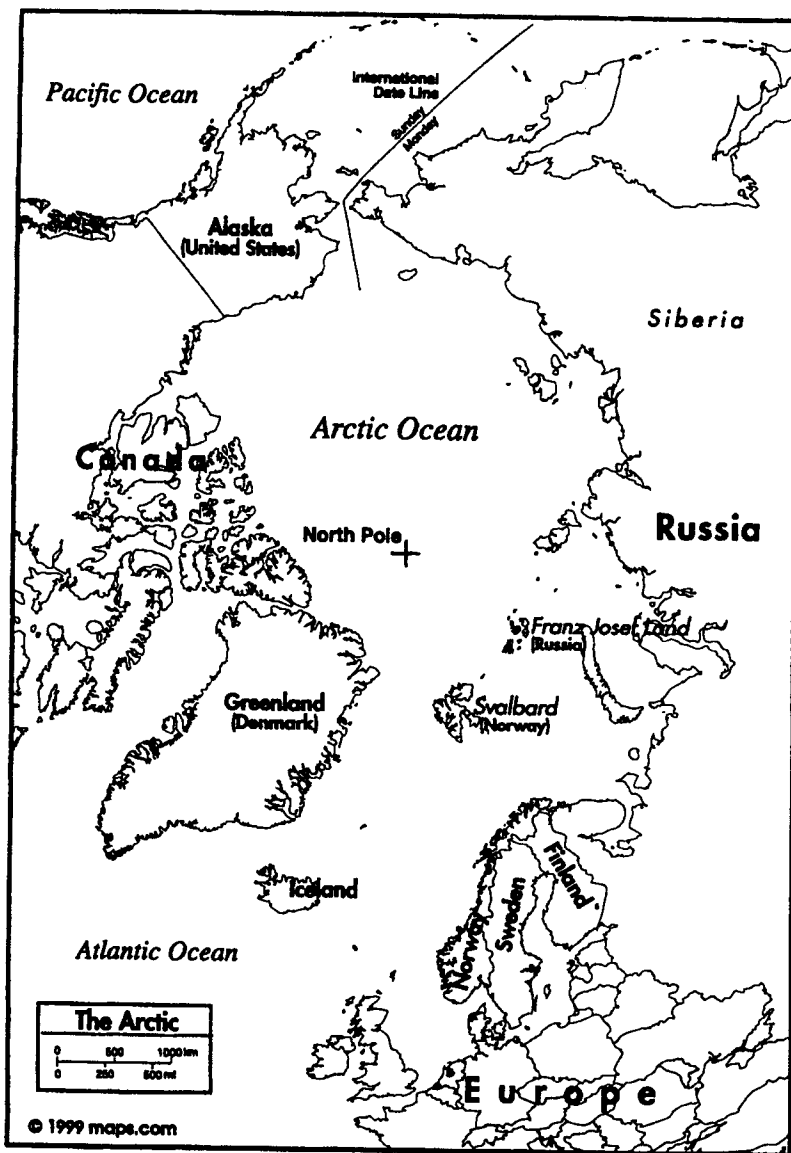
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# ENDANGERED PEOPLES of the Arctic

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*Struggles to Survive and Thrive*

Edited by Milton M. R. Freeman

The Greenwood Press  
 "Endangered Peoples of the World" Series  
 Barbara Rose Johnston, Series Editor



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