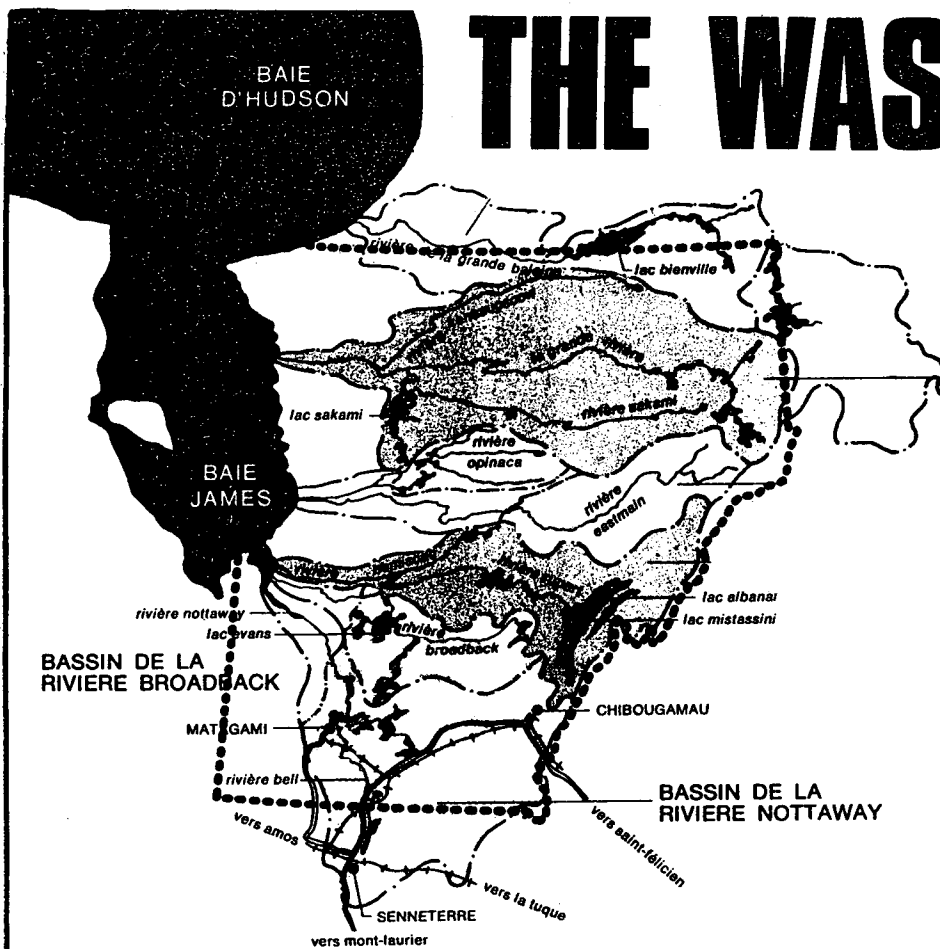


THE WASWANIPI OF JAMES BAY



"The village, the country, the food and the animals are here. They do not come and go like money. If we lost them, we should lose them forever, and we should lose ourselves.

by HARVEY FEIT

Before any white men penetrated the interior of the James Bay drainage basin of Quebec the presence of Europeans on the shores of James Bay and on the north shore of the Gulf of St. Lawrence was already changing the lives of the native peoples who lived in the interior. Goods were traded from one band of hunters to another far into the interior, the early trade including items both of beauty and of utility. This advance guard of Indian-white contact contained in a microcosm the delicate balance that was to characterize the relationship of native peoples and white men over the next centuries. The early trade brought not only benefits but suffering as well. With the goods new diseases brought, from overseas, spread death among the native peoples. In the decades before the first white men reached Lake Mistassini in 1660, reports coming to the trading centre at Tadoussac on the St. Lawrence indicated that many Indians in the interior were dying of smallpox. The exact impact of this and the epidemics that followed will never be known, but there are suggestions that one-third or one-half the populations of some groups were lost. When the first whites entered the region over three hundred years ago they were meeting a people who had already suffered catastrophically as a result of the coming of the Europeans.

From this time on the presence of white men on the continent has provided opportunities and benefits to the Indian people that have always been mixed with the costs, often unforeseen and exorbitant. And,

since that time the native peoples of the region have consistently attempted to strike a balance that would maintain the independence of the culture of their ancestors while adapting and using the opportunities available from white people. They became trappers, and now many have become workers, but they have always remained uniquely Indian, altering and maintaining a viable cultural and social system, an independent life style.

The native peoples of the James Bay region, in fact, have been almost uniquely successful in this process. Many peoples such as the Beothuks of Newfoundland, have been exterminated during these centuries. Most native peoples have been militarily and economically defeated by armies and treaties, and now live on reservations. Yet, most remain Indians, not just "red-white men"; rather they have been forcefully reasserting their Indianness and repeatedly rediscovering and recreating their identities and their pride.

In the James Bay region these revitalization processes have not occurred, for these people have never been anything but Indians and Eskimos. They have survived both because of their own wisdom, neither completely accepting nor completely rejecting the white man's gifts, and also because until lately it has not been in the interests of any powerful sector of white society to so utilize the resources of the region that the relationship of the native peoples to the resources on which they depend would be seriously limited.

The native peoples of the James Bay region maintain a distinctively viable cultural and social life mainly because of the extraordinary independence

they exercise when making the major decisions of their lives. Unlike many comparable small communities in the world, native communities in the James Bay region, despite their limited size, have maintained local control of decisions affecting the utilization of the basic resources on which they depend, in spite of the appearance, from the point of view of white society, that decisions were increasingly being made in Ottawa and Quebec City.

AS AN EXAMPLE OF THIS INDEPENDENCE we can cite the history of the establishment of the beaver preserves in the Waswanipi section in the southern part of the James Bay region in the 1940's and 1950's. On June 25, 1937 the Government of Quebec passed Order in Council 1722 which made illegal all killing of beaver in the province of Quebec without exception, because of the precipitous decline in the populations. On 29 April 1938 Order in Council 567 set up the Nottaway beaver preserve, which included the lands hunted by approximately eight Waswanipi families, and on August 4, 1948 Order in Council 1047 established the Mistassini beaver preserve which included the lands hunted by the remaining thirty-odd families. These legal actions could not, however be translated into living realities in the Waswanipi area of over 11,000 square miles without the cooperation of the Waswanipi hunters.

This cooperation was sought by the newly appointed agents of the federal Indian Affairs Branch who were charged with administering the preserves. They administered them, with the cooperation of the Hudson's Bay Company officials, by convincing the Indians that beaver populations would grow and the Indian people would benefit from the institution of a beaver management program. Pamphlets were issued in English and in Cree to promote the cause, and the managers of the preserves claimed the Indians cooperated because this practice was so much in keeping with their traditional means of preserving animals. From the outsider's view this enforcement of Government legislation was a significant reduction of local control over an important animal resource.

From the point of view of Waswanipi hunters this was not the case. Waswanipi men who were active hunters during this period state that the fur "boss" came to them and asked them to stop hunting beaver so the animals could grow again and that the hunters agreed to this because they thought it was a good idea. They said that they had killed too many beaver in previous years and the beaver were mad at them, so it was good not to kill them for a while; the beaver would stop being mad and they would grow in numbers and want to be caught again. Occasionally hunters say they would kill a beaver because they were hungry to taste its meat, and throughout the period of the closed season limited numbers of beaver pelts were sold at Waswanipi. Of the opening of the season and the beginning of beaver hunting again, Waswanipi hunters say that the government men said it was alright to hunt beaver again at just the right time. One man cited the fact that beaver were beginning to fight amongst themselves — an indication that the beaver were just beginning to be mad at the men for not killing them. Many men said that the beaver were then very tame and gentle as well as numerous and were no longer mad at the hunters.

Waswanipi hunters, then, interpret the closing of

the beaver hunting as a decision they themselves took with advice from the government authorities which they found timely and intelligent. Further, the success of the operation was for them not a confirmation of the wisdom of scientific game management but an example of the value and meaning of their own culturally unique folk science and understanding of the relationship between the hunter and the animals on which he depends. This interpretation has continued since the early 1950's.

Every year from the opening of the beaver preserves until the mid 1960's Waswanipi hunters went through the formality of reporting the number of beaver lodges on their land and having a government representative assign them a quota of beaver they could kill. This was not just an empty act, for it formalized the process they recognized of having to limit their beaver kills carefully so as not to overhunt the beaver. But it was formal in a sense since the time and place of hunting was still at the hunter's discretion. Indeed, many hunters said that they really could kill more beaver than in their quota if and when they felt it right to do so, because beaver could be traded despite the regulations, and could be sold by other hunters who did not go hunting or who otherwise did not fill their quotas. The regular discrepancies between reports of field researchers and the official records reflect this freedom of choice.

But Waswanipi hunters did not set out to break the law. When they hunted more animals than the official regulations permitted, it was in order to maintain a system of managing the resources in their region. It was, however, their system of management and not the government's which they sought to maintain. This was the resource management system which I studied at first hand in the Waswanipi region in the hunting seasons 1968-69 and 1969-70, several years after government regulation of beaver kills had ceased to operate in the area. The Waswanipi system depended not only on beaver, but on a management of all the resources available to the hunters.

IN THE WASWANIFI REGION the most productive resource is the fish, followed by beaver and then moose (measured as calories for human consumption per square mile per year). Hunting techniques, which are all sufficiently effective to make possible an over-harvest of the resources, allow a hunter to harvest moose most efficiently, beaver next and fish least efficiently (measured as calories for human consumption per man-day of work). The problem confronting a Waswanipi hunter, therefore, is that if he hunts only the animals which he can kill most efficiently he risks over-harvesting them, killing more than are produced annually and depleting his supply. This is especially the case for the moose.

Waswanipi hunters have a number of techniques for dealing with this problem. The first is rotational use of the land. Each piece of land is not hunted each year; a man will go to a different section of the territory he hunts in different years, in rotation, or he will exchange use of his territory with other men and their territories. In cases where such rotation was practised we found that hunters were able to catch enough moose and beaver to account for an average of seventy-five per cent of all the calories available for human consumption; fish and small game would account for five per cent and purchased foods for twenty per cent, on average. The harvests of both



moose and beaver were below our estimates of the productivity of these animals. The harvests of both were also related to the length of the rotation; that is, more moose and more beaver were killed per square mile of territory hunted on lands that had not been hunted for two-or-more years than on lands that had not been hunted for only one year. The critical cases, however, concerned those hunters who, because of the large number of hunters in their families and/or the small size of their territories, had to harvest the same piece of land for more than one year. In half these cases beaver and moose provided a significantly smaller percentage of the total food calories available for human consumption, averaging fifty per cent of the total, while fish and small game averaged approximately ten per cent and purchased foods forty per cent. This was so despite the fact that these latter foods are considered less desirable and less nutritious. In the complete sample of hunters who were not able to rotate their hunting areas we found that moose and beaver kills per square mile were both lower than in cases where the grounds had been rotated. In these cases the averaged harvest of the moose was equivalent to the estimated productivity of the moose population, and the results for beaver were similar.

In short, the evidence indicates that Waswanipi hunters do not over-harvest the moose and beaver populations of their region. When they have harvested the production they will use more fish and small

game, which require more work to catch, and more purchased food, which is less highly valued, rather than over-harvest. Waswanipi hunters then practise an independent and ecologically enlightened management of the resources on which they depend. They harvest the resources available to them on a sustained yield basis, while maximizing the efficiency and reliability of their hunt. This process takes place through the system of folk science and knowledge based on their own understandings of the world in which they live.

AS IN THE HUNTING SECTOR, local communities of native peoples in the James Bay area have maintained control over other critical sectors of their lives — their social institutions, bush housing, religion, art and the education of their children. They have, however, increasingly accepted social assistance, government financed housing in the settlements, new tools and equipment, wage employment and education from outside, in each case using the opportunities provided by outside institutions within a uniquely native context so that they have neither destroyed local autonomy nor allowed local stagnation.

For example, the rapid growth of the population in the last two decades and the increasing desire for benefits that could become available with higher cash

incomes have led to a movement of a significant number of men out of the bush economy, some only for brief periods, some permanently. The shift has not led, and it appears that it will not lead to the abandonment of the bush economy, but rather to some integration of bush and wage sectors of a local economy.

In a detailed study of the growing involvement of Waswanipi and Mistassini men on wage labor during the years 1965 to 1967 Ignatius La Rusic showed in detail how local autonomy and values were maintained during these changes. Men entered the labor market not as individuals, but as members of work gangs, and men chose to work only if and when generalized patrons were available — i.e. men who not only offered jobs, but who undertook to provide social services to the native peoples and their families and who acted as intermediaries between the native peoples and the institutions of outside authority. Among the parameters La Rusic found affected job choice were not only income, minimum capital, and stability but also language of work (Cree, English or French), style of work (bush vs. industrial), season (summer vs. year-round), location, extent of white interaction required, and the number of level of new skills required. In short, his findings suggest that native peoples of the region established their own terms on which they would enter wage employment, terms which maintained and exercised native cultural and social values.

This successful indigenous development of local communities in the James Bay region has been a foundation stone of the maintenance of an individual and collective personal integrity that is relatively unique. Here is one of the few places within North America where people of a distinctive culture have not been subjected to the kinds of pressures that destroy their identities. The native peoples of the James Bay region as a group have always perceived their lives as of their own making and have lived and acted responsibly, with grace and respect for their fellow men. The communities I have personal experienced in the region had a quality that many white people seek to recapture or recreate now; we call it a concern for the "quality of life". This integrity is founded on a real control by local people of the major resources on which their lives depend.

The initial explorations of a local wage economy have been very limited, partially because such an expanded economic sector would require local exercise of control over resources other than the animal resources which are required for the bush economy sector. Government assistance for local economic development has tended to focus on commercial fishing and tourism where the wage sector becomes a competitor of the bush sector for the same resources. However, indigenous development remained a possibility the exploration of which has already begun, however tentatively. This process has now been abruptly terminated.

IN JULY, 1971 THE GOVERNMENT of Quebec passed bill 50 establishing the James Bay Development Corporation (J.B.D.C.) and giving it administrative control over the James Bay Region in order to "promote the development and exploitation of natural resources". The corporation itself says that it is "an agency of conception, organization, direction and control — in other words, a management agency.

It will carry out its objectives in cooperation with government departments, para governmental agencies, and private enterprise".

One of the first tasks which confronted the J.B.D.C. was the need to involve the native people in the area under its control. The first conclusion of the Joint Federal-Provincial Task Force's "Preliminary Study of the Environmental Impacts of the James Bay Development Project Quebec" stated that: "On the basis of the limited data available, the Task Force can identify only one ecological impact of potentially alarming proportions and significance — the impact on the native population of the area. Appropriate action must be taken in advance to alleviate the ensuing disturbance of their mode of life".

The J.B.D.C., so far unable to establish a relationship with the native people of the region, has begun a transformation of the land and its resources that will have significant effects on the lives of the native peoples without the consent of or even consultation with those peoples. The social and ecological impacts of the planned construction have been the subject of some discussion and research; but it now seems that the most significant impact of present developments on the local population will evolve from the very structure of the relationship between the J.B.D.C. and the local population.

The determination of the J.B.D.C. to push on with the project despite the clearly expressed opposition of the native peoples to the project as it now stands must make one point clear to those peoples: that they are no longer going to be allowed to control the resources critical to their lives. The J.B.D.C. acts as if it was intent on terminating once and for all, the control that has until now been exercised by the native peoples. Although not consciously intended, the effect of this action must be to put local autonomy and the self-sufficiency of native people under great pressure and to risk breaking the integrity, self-respect and confidence of the people involved.

The corporations activities are supported by well-intentioned experts who have not recognized that processes of management and control already exist in these communities, in part because there are no supra-ordinate authorities in the communities vested with the planning function. The rational management and planning undertaken by the experts, therefore, conflicts with decision-making in the communities and with local control because it, in effect, removes decision-making from the local arena. In the past the result of such a process has frequently been severe cultural disorganization and disintegration.

The focus of planners on external control and management of resources on which the local population depends cuts right to the heart of local autonomy, although the planners themselves barely recognize this because they underestimate the extent to which such autonomy has been operational. It seems likely that the J.B.D.C. project will be considerably more disruptive of the way of life of the native peoples than its promoters intend or foresee.

The native people are up against great odds — not only a powerful institution, but men of power blinded by the dogma of development planning. The native people, however, have a long history of maintaining the quality of their lives and they have some important resources of their own. Most obvious is the strength which derives from the cultural integrity of life on James Bay.