



Twilight of the Cree

A massive hydroelectric power project threatens to destroy the delicate relationship between these northern Indians and their bleak land

The James Bay Cree Indians are an unusual people; 350 years after white men first entered James Bay in Quebec, the Cree continue to maintain the integrity and vitality of a hunting way of life. They live comfortably off the land in one of the less productive and least predictable environments of the earth, the subarctic boreal forest region.

Their hunting success is due in part to the knowledge the James Bay Cree have of their environment and, especially, of the animal populations on which they depend. Based on an intense relationship

with the land, their expertise is extraordinary not only for the detail but also for the complexity of their observations. They manage the animal resources by observing ecological principles in deciding what, where, when, and how to hunt. They hunt so as to maximize the long-term stability of the resources, limiting their harvests to levels that can be sustained for many years; and they value this ecological goal over other economic, political, and social ends.

The Indian peoples of the eastern shore of James Bay, who have prob-

by **Harvey A. Feit**



Hunting Nation

ably inhabited the region since the glaciers retreated several millennia ago, speak several local dialects of the Cree language. Collectively they have been called the James Bay, or the Eastern, Cree. The land on which they live was part of the unilateral grant by Charles II to the Hudson's Bay Company in 1670. It was transferred to the Dominion of Canada after confederation and is now claimed by the government of the Province of Quebec. The Cree, however, claim that they have never given up or abandoned their rights to this land.

This matter is now before the courts because the province is planning a massive hydroelectric project that calls for the eventual damming up of seven rivers and the creation of reservoirs. All of the rivers flow through the subarctic boreal forest and the tundra of eastern Quebec, an area of 172,000 square miles. Five of the rivers empty into James Bay, one into Hudson Bay, and one into Ungava Bay to the north. With the reservoirs will also come the inevitable roads, airports, towns, and more white men. No one is quite sure how these developments will

affect the ecology of the area—flatland, fragmented by thousands of lakes and hundreds of rivers—but the Cree are fearful that the land—as they have known it for thousands of years—and their relationship to it will be forever changed for the worse.

The Indians, numbering approximately 6,000 people at the end of 1972, are organized into eight administrative bands: the Mistassini, Waswanipi, Nemiscau, Rupert House, Old Factory, Eastmain, Fort George, and Great Whale River. The Waswanipi, distributed in a number of settlements between the



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towns of Mattagami and Chapais about three hundred miles northwest of Montreal, and the Mistassini are the only inland bands—the others hunt inland but their settlements are located along the bay.

As recently as twenty years ago the settlements of the James Bay Cree were little more than trading posts and summer gathering places for the respective bands between hunting and fishing expeditions. Most of the whites in the settlements provided services for the Indians, except in the area of the southern mining towns of Matta-

gami, Chapais, and Chibougamau. In 1971, the estimated white population of the entire region north of these towns was 350 persons, mainly government agents, teachers, medical staff, fur traders, missionaries, and bush transportation personnel.

In the last two decades, however, government assistance and wage employment have become available, and Indian children have started going to schools. These are the most recent of a long series of changes brought about by each successive wave of whites—first the fur traders,

then the missionaries, and now the government agents. Each wave has, in turn, been accepted by the Cree provided it assisted them to maintain their culture.

The Cree have generally felt that, along with knowing their own culture, it was important for their young people to be educated in schools. But even government assistance and schooling have not brought integration into the Canadian mainstream, and the Cree have increasingly sought Indian curricula and staff. Furthermore, to teach their children Cree ways and



ests for pulpwood are jobs that can be performed by family work groups, at irregular times, and in the bush so that fishing and hunting can also be carried on daily. In Waswanipi settlements, intermittent work and hunting have become common.

Most members of the Fort George Band live and work in their settlement year-round. Fishnets and snares are set within several miles of the settlement and checked every few days by family members. On hunting and trapping trips, men use snowmobiles to travel up to 100 miles. The Fort George settlement, the most diminished in bush living

In summer, some families move from cabins to cooler tents, which are often situated near logging sites. The Indians work at cutting and peeling pulp logs that are bought by paper companies.

thereby prevent their total alienation from their own language and life-style, the Cree keep approximately one-third of the school-age population out of school each year.

Wage employment has been integrated with a hunting life-style in a number of ways. At inland settlements such as Mistassini, summer wage employment is combined with winter hunting and trapping. The Cree choose jobs that are compatible with their social organization, bush skills, linguistic preferences, and seasonal changes. Commercial fishing and cutting for-

of the coastal bands, depends on the land for approximately one-half of its annual food requirements and the majority of the protein it consumes. For the James Bay Cree as a whole it has been estimated that 50 to 60 per cent of the food consumed is produced by subsistence activities. As a result of the successful integration of wage employment and education into their way of life, the Cree are developing closer ties to the society and economy of the rest of North America, while maintaining and modernizing their hunting way of life.

The hunting, whether full-time or part-time, still follows a cycle determined by the animals and the land, but it is only the full-time hunters who disperse each fall from the settlements for the winter hunting and trapping season, which lasts from five to nine months.

Throughout the winter hunting season the Cree are widely dispersed over 124,000 square miles of the James Bay region. This area is formally divided into parts that are used by each band and further subdivided into 233 hunting territories, or trap lines, ranging in size from approximately 100 to 1,500



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square miles, occupied by hunting groups. Hunting groups are made up of from five to thirty persons. Based on bilateral kinship ties and friendship bonds, each hunting group forms a separate, self-sufficient residential unit whose members live together from September or October until they return to the settlements in March or June. The hunting territories are recognized as part of the government's beaver preserve system. Each territory is "owned" by an individual, who is usually the leader of the group using the territory as well as the beaver tallyman.

As modern hunters and trappers, the Cree frequently fly between their settlements and their camps in chartered bush airplanes; at the camps they use canvas-covered canoes, outboard motors, and sometimes snowmobiles for transportation. They also use rifles, shotguns, steel traps, factory made

fishnets and canvas tents, tin wood-burning stoves, and commercially manufactured clothing. But they prepare their own caribou, moose, and beaver hides, using fleshing tools and other implements that they have made; make their own snowshoes, toboggans, moccasins, mitts, and sealskin mukluks in the coastal settlements; and build their own lodges and camps.

The animals available in winter vary from region to region. In the southern areas at Waswanipi and neighboring portions of Mistassini, winter subsistence depends primarily on moose and beaver. In the inland north, caribou are as important as moose and beaver; while on the coast, fish and preserved geese are important. At various times and places secondary winter resources include hares, bears, porcupines, ptarmigans, and partridge.

While on their hunting territories, the Cree provide the major-

ity of the food they consume. At Waswanipi more than 82 percent of the food is caught in the bush. Thirty percent of the calories available in winter come from moose. The average weight of moose killed is estimated to be more than 600 pounds, providing an average of 330 pounds of meat, fat, and edible organs per animal. Beaver, averaging just under 13 pounds of meat and fat per animal, provide 34 per-

Some cabins, such as this one owned by a Mistassini Band family, were financed by the federal Department of Indian Affairs. Women and children are left behind in the settlements when the men are off hunting.

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cent of the calories. Averaged over the whole year, fish are an equally important source of food. The few estimates of nutritional requirements indicate that all groups living on the hunting territories catch ample supplies for their needs, and many catch a surplus, some as much as two or three times their nutritional requirements. This food is made available to those residing in the settlements.

The view that hunters kill when they can and go hungry when they cannot is common in both popular and scientific opinion. Big mammal

hunting especially has been characterized as unpredictable, unreliable, and inefficient because the animals themselves are widely dispersed and highly mobile. Cree hunters, however, do not share this assessment; they speak of big game hunting as a reliable, efficient, and productive means of subsistence. The evidence I gathered during a two-year study of the Waswanipi Cree confirms the hunters' views. As I accepted this view rather reluctantly, it is appropriate to recount the research findings. In a general sense, the principles of management and the

organizational techniques used by the Waswanipi are probably typical of the James Bay Cree, although confirmation of this must await more intensive studies of other groups.

Moose in particular have been considered highly erratic, nongregarious, wide-ranging animals that can be hunted only with considerable uncertainty. The Waswanipi hunters stress, however, that killing a moose is easy. I was consistently told that when they are hunting moose, they are happy when they see tracks because they know they will soon be eating moose. When I asked the hunters what they did when they did not locate moose on a given day, they said they looked again. But when I questioned them as to what they did when they could not locate any moose, I was told that this never happened.

The Waswanipi say they know how to kill moose at any time of the year, but they generally limit their kills to specific seasonal periods and to specific daily climatic conditions within these seasons. During the mating season in October, the male moose can be called with a birch bark caller to the shore of a river or lake where they are easily exposed to the hunters.

Moose hunting is also productive during the latter part of March and early April, late winter in this region, when sunlight melts the top-most layer of the snow, which then freezes during the night. In the mornings or on colder days moose will break through the ice, cutting their legs against the edges of the hole. Under these conditions they often will not move, even when in full view of a man. Kills, however, are limited at these times because in the fall many hunters have not yet gone to their hunting grounds, and in the late winter many are preparing to return to the summer settlements.

The most important moose-hunting period for the Waswanipi is in January and February. During the early winter, the moose begin to have trouble walking as their legs penetrate deeply through the light fluffy snow and their bodies drag. The critical snow depth for an adult moose is two and a half or three



feet—beyond this the moose must plow a trough in order to walk. Throughout the early winter, therefore, moose move to locations with lower snow accumulations. Waswanipi hunters say that the moose move to hardwood-covered hills exposed to the wind, which blows the snow cover thin.

By January the moose are usually concentrated in these suitable areas, generally confining themselves to established paths they have packed by repeated use.

When this happens, hunters say that moose can be easily stalked. If a moose sees or, more likely, hears a hunter, it will flee from its "yard" only to be quickly exhausted by the deep snow. The Waswanipi report that after a few hours of steady stalking, a man on snowshoes will have so tired a moose that it will stand its ground and be killed.

Hunting is preferred on so-called moose days, when there is a slight north or west wind, a light snowfall, and a moderately cold temperature. The sound of the wind covers the noise of the hunter's approach, the snow allows the age of tracks to be easily judged, and the moderate cold keeps the snow fluffy and dry so it does not make noise or stick to

the snowshoes and make walking difficult. If the wind is from the east, however, the moose will stay hidden in deep bush, making them difficult to locate.

The Waswanipi prefer to hunt for moose at those times when the chances of success are high. The hunters stress that it is important that they kill moose and other animals swiftly and cleanly. They say that moose meat is less tasty if the animal has been exhausted before being killed, and more important, they must not make the animals suffer unnecessarily.

In the culturally constructed world of the Cree, the animals, the winds, and many other phenomena are thought of as being "like persons" in that they act intelligently, are willfully idiosyncratic, and understood, and are understood by, men.

The hunters say that the animals they kill are a gift to them from the animals themselves and from the master of the animals—*Chuetenshu*, the north wind, who is the helper of Jesus. *Chuetenshu* brings the cold, the snows of winter, and his little brother, the west wind. The gifts given to a hunter place him under reciprocal obligations to cause the animals no unnecessary suffering, to observe structured procedures for retrieving, butchering, and disposing of the animal, and to completely use the flesh and useful parts. The animal's body nourishes a hunter and his family, but the animal's soul returns to be reborn, so that when men and animals are in balance the animals are killed but not diminished, and both men and animals survive.

An analysis of Waswanipi moose-hunting behavior indicates that their actual hunting is consistent with their descriptions. In a sample of midwinter moose hunting, all kills occurred after the snow cover was more than thirty inches. 75 percent of these occurred on days with a snowfall of one inch or less, and the same percentage occurred on days with above average wind speeds. One kill was made for approximately every two days' hunting effort.

Waswanipi reliability and efficiency is also evident in the hunting

of other animal species, which are harvested when chances of success and the efficiency of capture are high. The annual cycle is a model for integrating these various harvesting activities so that each is used at the appropriate time, and so that at least two resources can be used at each period throughout the year.

The Waswanipi are such successful hunters that their most critical problem is, not the locating and killing of game, but rather limiting the kills that their prodigious skills make possible. If the hunters were to kill more animals than are being produced by the species population, future production might then be reduced. This problem is especially critical in a zone of relatively low biological productivity.

The Waswanipi recognize that the hunters must balance their kills. While the animals a hunter kills are gifts from *Chuetenshu*, one of the obligations a hunter must fulfill is to determine which of the animals he encounters is being given to him. This decision depends on integrating information from a variety of sources—signs of the animals, weather conditions, the behavior of the animals, dreams and visions, and the hunter's past success. Each of these pieces of information is thought to be a communication from *Chuetenshu*, the animals, or other personages involved in the hunt. The most general informational frame within which this data is placed is the hunter's own previous hunting success.

The belief is that if a hunter should kill more animals than he was given in any year, then *Chuetenshu* and the animals will be angry and will give that hunter fewer animals the next year. The success of past hunting and its implications for current hunting are communicated to the hunter by the animal signs he sees. Hunters constantly note signs of the frequency of game and compare their evaluations of the trends in the animal populations. These trends are the most important indicator for a hunter of what he will be given in the present season, and through them most hunters formulate a definite expectation.



PAUL BAICH



BOYCE RICHARDSON

Animal pelts in a Mistassini hunting camp, above, are hung to dry out of reach of dogs. The pelts are purchased by fur traders who fly from camp to camp in bush planes.

At right, moose meat is hauled from the site of the kill to a camp, where it will be stored until taken to the settlements.

Until the coming of the snowmobile. Cree settlements were partially deserted during the winter when hunting groups went off to their hunting territories. Now the hunters can return to the settlements after brief expeditions

At the beginning of each hunting season most Cree dream or are told by *Chuetenshu* how much big game they will be given. This information is constantly checked and revised as the season progresses. The result is that the hunters feel themselves under an obligation to limit kills to those animals they know are harvestable without initiating a decline in the population.

Deciding how many of each species should be killed is an extremely complex task; one of the ways the hunters resolve it is by rotational use of the hunting territories. Families with few active hunters and dependents relative to the size of their territory hunt only a portion of the territory each year. This way the Cree hunt moose and beaver intensively on one section in a given year and then monitor the growth of the populations on that section in the succeeding years.

Rotational use allows the hunters to live off the most efficiently usable and most highly valued food species, namely moose and beaver. An analysis of the catches indicates that under rotation, harvests are well below the productivity of these species.

Those families who, because of the small size of their hunting territories or the large number of hunters and family dependents, must use all of their territories each year, face a more difficult problem. Fish and small game are relatively more productive resources, when measured as calories for human consumption per square mile per year, than are moose and beaver. These families, therefore, use the more

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Twilight of the Cree Hunting Nation

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productive resources more intensively. Of the groups who must hunt their entire territories, about half show indications that a smaller proportion of their diet comes from moose and beaver than that of groups who hunt on rotated territories. The families who hunt less moose and beaver eat more fish and small game and also purchase more foodstuffs to take with them into the bush.

For those groups who used their hunting territories the year previous to the recorded year, the average harvests of both moose and beaver were just below the estimated productivities of each species. Furthermore the populations of moose and beaver have shown no abnormal declines in the last twenty years.

The extent to which the Waswanipi actually behave in accordance with their ecological knowledge is important. One major reason for the consistency of their behavior is the allocation of rewards to those who practice ecologically sound hunting practices. The Waswanipi say that *Chuetenshu* and the animals will be angry if a hunter kills for self-aggrandizement. A hunter's kills, especially those of moose and beaver, become public knowledge, since members of a group often receive portions of an animal killed by an individual, and meat is widely distributed in the settlements to families not hunting full time. When hunters return to the settlements, the hunting results are a major topic of conversation. A hunter's reputation rests on the public knowledge of his kills, and this reputation is an important component of his status in the community.

Cree who are considered outstanding hunters are those who do not experience ups and downs in hunting success. Numerically, they may not have the highest kills in any one year, but year in and year out, they consistently have the greatest success. A man's reputation as a hunter is therefore tied to his success in managing the game populations on which he depends, not his success in killing large numbers of animals. The result is that good ecological management is rewarded in the political arena.

The success of the Waswanipi Cree, and of the James Bay Cree as

a whole, is a testament to the importance of giving priority to ecological principles. The James Bay Cree have been able to adapt to, and integrate their hunting life-style with, the changes brought by white men partially because of the ecological stability they help to maintain. The land and its resources are a touchstone of the Cree's security and vitality. Knowing the land will always be there, they have felt secure that there would be future generations of Cree. While they no longer depend solely on the land for their nutritional, material, or spiritual needs, the Cree believe that the land will remain a vital part of their way of life. Their vision and practice can be a model for other North Americans who are struggling to rebuild a balance with their environments. It should be a model for those whites who propose to develop the James Bay region, especially the planners of the recently begun James Bay hydroelectric project.

Confronted with the plans for this project, the James Bay Cree have had an almost uniform response—they ask what the project will do to the land and express concern for the fate of future generations of Cree. They have not opposed the project in principle, but if the proposed changes harm the land and the Indians' future, they do not want them. If, however, the changes are ecologically sound, the Cree want to give consideration to the project as they have to other changes in the past.

The authorities involved in the planning and development of the project have not satisfactorily answered the Cree's questions. The planners have had very few specific ecological answers, because getting the relevant information would require delaying the project and possibly reducing its economic and political benefits. But the Cree have implied that before the economic, political, and social implications of the project are discussed, they want to consider the ecological implications. So far, the James Bay Cree's reactions to the project have not been understood, much less dealt with, by the development planners. □

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Authors

A lifetime professional interest in the physiology of sense perception, combined with thirty years of living with dachshunds, led Kenneth D. Roeder to probe the retrieval antics of his current pet, Morris. By throwing a ball to his dog in their Concord, Massachusetts, back yard, Roeder provided Morris with exercise and himself with numerous



Kenneth D. Roeder

sights into animal behavior. A professor of physiology at Tufts University, Roeder studies the neural mechanisms of insect behavior and for the past twenty years has been investigating the interactions of bats and moths. He has written more than sixty papers on insect brain function and is the author of *Nerve Cells and Insect Behavior*, published by Harvard University Press.

Richard E. Warner, presently a consultant in environmental biology, first became interested in the riddle posed by the decline and extinction of Hawaiian honeycreepers in 1957, when a review of the literature and his own field studies suggested that a distributional pattern was involved. Later, his position as a research coordinator with the Game Bureau, Hawaii Department of Land and Natural Resources provided him with an unusual opportunity to investigate the disappearance of many endemic birds. He has "always felt the need for personal involvement in conservation matters as a basic element

of social responsibility" and is now on his way back to Hawaii to continue his work on the ecology of the



Richard E. Warner

honeycreepers, particularly the impact of disease. Journeying aboard his own boat, he is currently studying coastal resources and environmental problems somewhere between southern Florida and the Caribbean.

Long drawn to the sea and its life forms, Gilbert L. Voss dates his interest in coral reefs to summer vacations spent sailing off the Florida



Gilbert L. Voss

Keys as a youth. He served four years in the Coast Guard, has worked as a fishing-boat captain and guide, and has conducted scientific cruises off the tropical coasts of West Africa and South and Central America. A specialist in cephalopods, Voss is professor of marine science and chairman of the Division of Biology at the Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science of the University of Miami. His current research includes the effects of pollution on the biotas of Florida's southeast coast and the biology of the fauna of the Puerto Rico Trench.

For the past five years Harvey A. Feit has conducted field work with the Cree Indian hunters of northern Quebec, studying their adaptations to changing environmental and cultural conditions. Now an assistant professor of anthropology at Carleton University in Canada, he is completing his doc-



Harvey A. Feit

toral dissertation on the hunting ecology of the Waswanipi Band of the Cree tribe. When the Quebec government announced plans for the James Bay hydroelectric project in 1971, Feit became active in a number of committees concerned with how the project would affect the traditional life patterns of the Indians in the area.