

## James Bay Cree and Hydro-Quebec

For the James Bay Cree people of northern Quebec province in Canada, the watershed event was the decision in 1971 to develop the hydro-electric potential of their rivers. Facing one of the largest energy development projects ever built, the Cree people and their Inuit allies in the Hudson Bay area demanded recognition of their Aboriginal rights and went to court to assert their authority over the land.

The James Bay hydro project was a watershed event also for the evolution of Aboriginal land claims in Canada, and for the critique of large development projects. A powerful coalition of environmentalists and Aboriginal leaders, assisted by a well-publicized and prolonged court case in 1972-1973, was successful in initiating public discussion on some of the themes important in this volume: the role of humans in the environment, and the idea that humans can be a part of nature. The events triggered public discussion on the notion of a traditional ecology in which humans and nature are in a symbolic relationship, with mutual obligations leading to “respect,” central idea in the relations of many Amerindian groups with nature.

The Cree and the Inuit found not only a receptive public, but also a court sympathetic to their cause. They were successful obtaining an injunction to stop development in 1973. However, this decision was overturned only a few weeks later by a higher court, forcing the Cree and Inuit to the negotiating table for the surrender of their Aboriginal claims and to open the way for hydro development. In 1975, the Cree and Inuit signed the *James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement*, the first of the modern comprehensive land claims agreements in Canada. Under the *Agreement*, the Cree and Inuit obtained ownership rights to areas around their communities, exclusive hunting and fishing rights over a large territory, regional self-government powers, cash compensation and other privileges, in exchange for allowing Hydro-Quebec, the power company, to proceed with development.

The 1975 *Agreement*, signed under duress, left the Cree leadership with strong and ambiguous feelings about development. In the 1980s, the Cree allowed a series of alterations of the original hydro development plans. But in 1993, the Cree successfully fought and blocked a multibillion dollar extension of the James Bay hydro project, known as the James Bay II or Great Whale development after the name of the Grande Baleine (Great Whale) River which is to the north of the James Bay I development.

Subsequently, in 2001, the Cree leadership signed an interim deal for the development of the Rupert and Eastmain rivers to the south of the James Bay I development. The action triggered a bitter fight that pitted community leaders against one another, with the chief of one of the directly affected communities, who was initially a key supporter, declaring, "I have little enthusiasm for going down in history as the Waskaganish chief who signed the death warrant for the Rupert River" (*Montreal Gazette*, 10 December 2001). As long as undeveloped hydro-electric potential exists in the region, these battles are likely to continue. But the important questions for our volume are, who are these Cree people who talk about rivers as if they were alive, and what is their belief system really like?

The eastern James Bay Cree are part of the largest Aboriginal group in Canada. Their lands cover a good part of the boreal forest zone that stretches across Canada, and part of the northern plains. The Cree groups of the boreal forest were traditionally hunters, and many of them still obtain a large part of their protein diet from the land. Their hunting ethics and belief systems are rich, and have been documented extensively by anthropologists such as Harvey Feit, Richard Preston, Adrian Tanner and Robert Brightman.

The central belief of the James Bay Cree and some other groups of the boreal forest is that animals make themselves available to hunters who treat them properly. Those who break rules of proper conduct are punished. This punishment usually takes the form of hunting failure, and it can be individual or communal. For example, the Chisasibi Cree believe that the disappearance of caribou from their area for some seventy years is related to a disastrously large and bloody hunt that took place in 1914 when the repeating rifle first became available (Berkes 1999).

The rules of proper conduct are expressed as practices to follow, such as practices of showing respect for the animal. For example, the bones of important animals have to be disposed of in certain ways, as in placing of beaver skulls on trees. Tanner lists the many ways in which the Mistassini Cree show respect for black bears, from hunter's initial approach with an attitude of humility, to offerings made to the dead animal, to the butchering, consumption of the meat, and the disposal of the remains. Some of the rules are expressed as practices and attitudes to avoid. For example, it is widely believed that

fish will avoid a person who boasts about his/her skills and previous successes. How do they know? Because the land is alive and animals are sentient beings.

Religion may be broadly defined as encompassing issues regarding the meaning of human life and engagement with transcendent powers, such as forces that impinge on people's lives. Most Cree are Christians, but their "religion" in the above sense indicates a belief system that differs considerably from the mainstream Western society. The Cree believe in a nature that pulsates with life and meaning. Their ecology is spiritual, rather than impersonal and mechanistic. Landscapes "know" people, rather than people knowing the land. Animals control the hunt and can retaliate by "returning the discourtesy." Humans, animals and other beings in the environment share the same Creator; hence, just as one person, one respects animals. Social relations such as mutual obligations and reciprocity are extended to non-human nature. Respect and humility are important, and Cree culture is rich in rituals that symbolize respect and remind the hunter of his/her ethical obligations.

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### **Further Reading**

Berkes, Fikret. *Sacred Ecology: Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Resource Management*. Philadelphia: Taylor & Francis, 1999.

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Richardson, Boyce. *Strangers Devour the Land*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1975.  
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Tanner, Adrian. *Bringing Home Animals: Religious Ideology and Mode of Production of the Mistassini Cree Hunter*. London: Hurst, 1979.

*See also:* Aboriginal Environmental Groups in Canada; Harmony in Native North America; Indigenous Activism and Environmentalism in Latin America; Indigenous Environmental Network; Inuit; Traditional Ecological Knowledge; Traditional Ecological Knowledge among Aboriginal Peoples in Canada.