

People, History and Environment in James Bay – Brian Craik

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The ancestors of the present day peoples of James and Hudson Bays, the Inuit and the Eeyouch left very little as a footprint of their ancient presence on the territory. The Crees, or Eeyouch as they call themselves, lived on the lands, which were some of the most difficult areas in the world for humans to occupy. From time immemorial they made their livings without steel, without matches, cloth, paper, or externally accessible sources of food, other than what they obtained through the hunt.

From the archaeological record it appears that technological, economic, social and cultural change were slow, at least as much as this can be measured by the meager physical remains of those times. The ways of life of the ancient inhabitants of this area were different from what we know today. In ancient times one had a tool kit that provided a way of life, it was your occupation and way of life to learn how to gain a way of life. The past was a guide to the future.

Past Ways of Living

Sure there was “change” in the past, but it was mostly seasonal or it concerned large natural processes of climate change. We now know that in the past there were long periods of colder and warmer weather. The presence of animals at certain places was not always to be counted upon. Storms, earthquakes, floods and extremes in weather, the presence or absence of diseases and the incidence of death and birth and the coming of age of individuals were among the ways that people marked the passage of time.

Success in making a way of life did not mean making life easier for the next generation; one could not count on that. The passage of traditional knowledge from generation to generation was the best way to ensure chances of survival and perhaps prosperity, although nobody stored wealth. Success was providing for your family and friends and by having the skills to make a living and the wisdom to act as a responsible member of your community. This of course meant that one had to be able to live through times of hardship by having the strength to persevere and the wisdom to accept help or to give help to others because that was part of the

way of life. Living from the land one lived through stages in life of being able to provide for others as well as through times of not being able to provide and of having to accept help from others.

I don't say that all of this was completely unique to the experience in other societies in the past or present, but rather in Cree society as in other hunting and gathering cultures, life was extremely personal, there was little anonymity and there was little external help.

Opening Hudson and James Bays

With the coming of the world economy into the Bay in trading ships and in the form of the fur trade, technological innovations came in to Eeyou Istchee. Steel knives, axes, hooks, cloth, eventually matches (not invented until 1855 Johan Edvard Lundstom - Sweden) and firearms, along with tea, sugar and other items came into the Cree and world. These provided an easier way of life in some regards and no doubt the demand for furs changed the ways that people conducted their hunts. However it is recorded in the Hudson Bay Company's journals that the Chisasibi Crees sometimes had to be convinced to spend more time trapping rather than hunting caribou.

Perhaps the reason that the Chisasibi, Wemindji and Whapmagoostui people today refer to their trapping lands as "beaver lands" is that division of the land into smaller family held units was a later addition to their hunting strategies. In the southern communities where the large herds of caribou were seldom seen and where people were more focussed on beaver trapping, they call their family hunting territories ntoho astchee : hunting lands.

There is much that could be said about the colonial regime that was put into place at the time of the fur trade and in particular after the amalgamation of the Hudson's Bay Company and the Northwest Company in 1821 when the Hudson's Bay Company became monopoly. With that event the colonial regime was firmly in place. The colonial terms had and have a particularly long durability: "factory" referring to a trading post – seldom used today, "tallyman" referring to the one responsible for collecting the furs – rather than the debt collector as it was used in England at the time, or vote counter, or banana counter as it was used in the tropics. The term "main" came from "mainland" colonial shipping days, "Spanish

Main” being the term of the Spanish American colonies and the Eastmain being the eastern side of James Bay.

The end of the HBC colonialism came with the Deed of Surrender Agreement in 1869 to transfer the land rights of the company to Canada.

The fur trade and many of the trading posts continued but the with the coming of settlers to the western provinces and the encroachment of settlers to Cree lands in the area to the south of Eeyou Istchee later in the 19th century and early 20th , the rate of cultural and social change accelerated. Air travel came after the First World War, the construction of roads for mining in the 1950’s and the beginning of forestry operations in the territory made possible by the roads, did not stop the Crees from hunting nor did they decrease their dependency on trapping. Southern Cree communities gained opportunities to work for cash to supplement their incomes with the coming of development. However, the main attachment of the Crees of the Bay to the world economy came through Ontario once the railway was built to Moosonee by the Temiskaming and Northern Ontario Railway in 1932. The rest of the Bay was made accessible by airplane (Austin Airways started in 1934 in Timmins) and barge. The Bay was no longer directly linked to Europe.

Industrial Colonialism

It was however the coming of Hydro Quebec in the form of the James Bay Project that began to change the relationship of the Crees to their lands. For one thing, Hydro Quebec came to the territory from the inland. For another thing, hydro development was premised on the reshaping of the river and lake systems and to do so required the reshaping of the landscape through flooding, the construction of a vast road network and through the bulldozing of the land to construct the thousands of dykes and dams needed to control water.

It is the result of this remaking of the land that the Crees had to adapt to. The roads opened the door to mineral exploration but it is just today, 44 years later that mines are being developed as a result of road construction.

The flooding resulted in 30 or more years of increased mercury in many species of fish used by the Crees.

The increased flows contributed to the increased turbidity in coastal waters and to increased winter flows of fresh water in the Bay resulting in destruction and changes of habitat for water fowl and marine mammals.

Inland flooding has created a new corridor for migrating geese and other waterfowl that have begun to follow the path of hydroelectric reservoirs and this probably resulted in the decrease of the coastal flyways.

The adoption of motorized vehicles (boats, 4X4's, trucks, and snow mobiles) and the means to buy them has been a positive outcome of this development. The Crees on the east coast of James and Hudson Bay are far more mobile than their ancestors were. They can travel in a day what would have taken their ancestors weeks to travel. As a result the Crees follow the game more than they ever did. They continue to occupy the territory but not with the same pattern of use as ancestors used. The Crees have built over 600 trapper and hunter cabins on the 301 family hunting territories where they go to continue to hunt, fish and trap. Many times I have heard people say that they work in town to be able to buy the equipment needed today to continue the Cree traditional way of life. Might I say to satisfy, in new ways, an ancient Cree wish to live in the bush? One question is brought to mind: What type of infrastructures will the Crees and the Inuit build in order to more effectively occupy the coast and off-shore?

The Impacts of Population Growth

In 1973 I interviewed an elder, the late John Blackned, who told me that the people knew in the past that one day they would overcome the animals. He was speaking of the presence of the snowmobile, the repeating rifle and the use of outboard engines to power increasingly large canoes. At the time many people were leaving their children in town while the parents or sometimes two or three men would hunt and trap, returning to the town for Christmas and for the spring hunt at the end of March.

Increased effectiveness of hunting raises the importance of game management. Hunters and industries that reduce animal habitats must ensure that their activities promote the on-going viability of animal populations. In 1911 a census of the population on the territory the total population was under 1600 including the non-native population. Between 1977 and 2006 the Cree population went from 7,000

to over 15,000 and approaches 18,000 today. Curiously the number of people on the income security program did not increase or decrease much over the same question. This begs the question of whether the harvest of animals by those on income security exceeds or is less than the number harvested by those not on the program. In addition to these numbers there are today almost an equivalent population of Non-Crees who reside in the territory and another number, in the order of 20,000 who visit the territory for short visits. Where once 1,600 people lived today there are 35,000 residents.

On the mainland the future of the woodland caribou is in peril due to forestry cutting of their remaining habitat. The Government of Quebec has been discussing this issue for several years but has so far refused to publish the recommendations of the expert committee set up to examine the situation and has dragged its feet in the implementation of protected caribou habitat.

Crees also have exclusive rights over certain species in the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement. This includes the Lake Sturgeon. After the partial diversion of the Rupert River under the EM1A – Sarcelles Project, the harvest of this sturgeon was extremely high, over 1,500 at Nemaska. The community then implemented a program whereby the ntoho oujemauch would monitor the take every year to ensure that the stock is not over-fished. Such efforts may be also necessary in the future for other species. One wonders also if certain lakes where harvesting of fish is uncontrolled will require mechanisms, such as monitoring of the catches, licensing maximum harvests or periodic closures in the future.

Coming Development

To date the Bays have been largely protected from development. The Bays used to be the communication and shipping centers of the fur trade. The 20th century saw the dwindling importance of marine shipping on the Bay, in the last part of the century marine transport was used to supply communities rather than to ship out furs. Today there is talk of perhaps a port being built there to haul iron ore to China or perhaps elsewhere. We have also seen a proposal to lay a fibre optic cable from England to Tokyo with a branch through Chisasibi to join the New York Stock Exchange to the others.

New economic opportunities will certainly arise from these and other proposals. Cree and Inuit societies will undoubtedly continue to want to participate in this development. As a consequence these communities will continue to become more diversified in their economic and administrative activities. What it means to be an Inuit or a Cree person will increasingly be expressed through the variety of occupations that they take on and use to the benefit of their communities and of themselves.

The speed of development will be determined largely by the demand for resources from the world populations as we reach 9 billion in number. At the present time there is a slow-down but that is the way with development and soon we will see it resurge. This is a time to put our regulatory entities into place so that we can maximize the positive economic, social and environmental effects of development on the people of James and Hudson Bays.

To Conclude

The hunting-fishing- trapping and gathering way of life, the “traditional way of life” will continue to be defined and redefined by the Crees and Inuit.

As never before in the past was there is a growing number of Crees who do not spend most of their time in the bush. Some people, hunters or not have diverse interests in business or are creating new form of Cree art and music and they are starting to write about how they see the world from their Cree perspective. Crees today often travel to experience other cultures, to explore new economic potentials, for educational purposes, for relaxation or just to go shopping. The children of those who used to walk hundreds of miles in the search of a livelihood now travel the world.

They will continue to define their way of life and their futures on individual and community bases and as peoples.