

# Electric Project and the Cree

## Reaching effects on all Canadians

Stevens

When intimately to the Cree, would  
light. But it proved to be an uphill  
Government declared that the Cree had  
lands.  
action. The hearing began that  
evidence produced 312 exhibits and  
cases ever heard in a Canadian court.



s, yet court proceedings limped on,  
hunters and trappers who had been  
able to grasp the concept of land

court decided that the Cree had an  
phase of the James Bay Project was

vision, and after one week's consid-  
er court's decision. Work started  
power-houses along the La Grande

COULD NOT BE ABLE TO STOP the  
and settlement. In 1975, the Grand  
to ahead in return for 225 million  
so asked for, and were granted, an

at the James Bay Project would do  
r, the Cree do not share this view.  
says Henry Meanscum, chief of the  
ay 'Don't eat the fish', but fish has

giant James Bay development, the  
mercury poisoning on a massive and  
community of Chisasibi, a village at  
and the classic symptoms of mercury  
peripheral vision and neurological  
of the La Grande hydro-electric

project, it was estimated that two of every three people in Chisasibi had unacceptably high levels of mercury in their bodies.

So where does the mercury come from? According to scientists, mercury is commonly found in rocks throughout the north in an insoluble form that does not affect the air and water. However, the flooding of land allows the mercury concentrated in the soil and decomposing plant life to be attacked by bacteria which, through a complex biological process, transforms this insoluble mercury into poisonous methyl mercury. This lethal by-product then vapourizes, enters the atmosphere and falls back into the water. From there it enters the food chain, reaching highest concentrations in fish species that prey on other fish.

### THE RESULTS OF THE FIRST

phase of the James Bay Project have been devastating, both for the land and the people who inhabit it. Now the Cree people are struggling to regain their equilibrium while the ecosystem which supported them is desperately trying to balance itself.

This is leading to an increased militancy on the part of the Cree people. Matthew Coon Come, Grand Chief of the Quebec Crees, explains that the signing of the James Bay Agreement has not given the Quebec government carte blanche to build dams and power stations throughout the Territory.

"Because Quebec insisted on prejudicing the conduct of environmental and social impact reviews, refuses to give consideration to other rights and uses of the land, and insists on constructing these projects no matter what the outcome of any environment and social impact review, the Crees have been forced to use whatever means available to stop the projects," says Grand Chief Coon Come.

He continues: "We have never given up our aboriginal rights in northern Quebec. We have only given consent for the construction of the Complexe La Grande and have not given permission for future projects."

Chief Billy Diamond, who was on the original James Bay negotiating team in the 1970s, was even more blunt when he addressed a Commons committee earlier this year.

"We're sitting in a very volatile situation right now," he told the committee.

"It's a very explosive bomb, with a very short fuse. . . If the situation continues as it is, there is going to be violence."

However, since the spring, the Cree have won a significant legal victory which means that the federal government will have to carry out an environmental impact survey before the Great Whale Project is approved. And the Americans, who had promised to buy most of the power generated by the James Bay Project, are now of the opinion that the environmental cost for Canada might be too high.

What all this means is that the land and the people who inhabit it have been granted a temporary stay of execution. Luke McLeod, whose listening audience includes the hunters and trappers who still go to the bush each year, hopes that this postponement will become permanent.



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