

The James Bay Hydroelectric

A native issue that has far-reaching

By Mark Stevens

LIKE MOST INDIAN RESERVES IN CANADA, Mistissini has its share of problems. Drug abuse, family violence and alcoholism have already taken their toll on the inhabitants of this sprawling Cree community 400 miles to the north of Montreal.

Yet the biggest threat to the Cree of Mistissini is not beer or bootleg whiskey. It is water. Billions and billions of gallons of water, the driving force behind one of the world's largest hydro-electric projects.

This statistic does not impress the Cree people, who are already suffering from the effects of what has become known as the James Bay Hydro-Electric Project. Fish, once the staple diet of Northern Quebec's native people, are now contaminated with mercury. Vast tracts of land, which have supported the Cree for the last 6,000 years, were flooded to create enormous reservoirs. Rivers have been dammed and diverted; whole native communities moved. And roads and runways are now scarring a land of breathtaking beauty, destroying a fragile ecosystem which will never recover.

The scope of the James Bay Project is awe-inspiring. If completed, it would harness the energy of almost every drop of water in the rivers flowing through 350,000 square kilometres of northwestern Quebec. Rivers once traveled by the Cree will be dammed to create huge reservoirs, flooding a combined area bigger than the surface of Lake Ontario.

WHEN THE JAMES BAY HYDRO-ELECTRIC PROJECT was announced in 1971, the Premier of Quebec, Robert Bourassa, hailed it as the project of the century.

However, the Cree and Inuit of northern Quebec were less than enthusiastic.

"We weren't even told about the James Bay Project," says Luke McLeod, a Cree broadcaster who inherited his Scots surname from a Hudson's Bay Company trader. "It was as if the Cree people didn't even exist."

McLeod went on to explain how Philip Awashish, who was later chosen to negotiate the land claims settlement on behalf of his people, picked up a day-old Montreal newspaper in a Chibougamau drugstore and read about the James Bay development plans.

The report explained that all of the rivers running into the James Bay would be dammed and diverted, with reservoirs built all along their length. The Nottaway, Broadback, Rupert, Eastmain and La Grande rivers would all be dam controlled, the waters to be transferred back and forth from one river to another. Seven power stations were scheduled to be built on the Rupert alone. Mistissini Lake would be blocked at its outlet on the Rupert and would become forty feet higher

and half as big again. dozens of other lakes, known intimately, disappear forever.

The Cree were outraged, and they decided to fight. But the battle.

The battle started in court after the Quebec government denied the Cree no rights to their traditional hunting and trapping lands.

In October 1972, the Cree filed their first court action. In December, and for the next six months 167 witnesses presented evidence. They spoke 10,000 pages of transcribed evidence.

It was described as one of the most remarkable cases ever heard.



Neither side truly understood the other's arguments, yet court proceedings were crippled by this lack of understanding. The Cree hunters and trappers called to give evidence were, for example, unable to give evidence of land ownership.

"Who owns the land?", they were asked.

"No one," they replied. "We just look after it."

Eleven months after the hearing began, the court decided in favor of the aboriginal right to the threatened land and the first phase of the project stopped.

However, the hydro-company appealed this decision, and the Quebec Appeals court overturned the lower court decision immediately on the construction of reservoirs on the Rupert River.

THE CREE SOON REALIZED THAT THEY WOULD NOT

James Bay Project, so they opted for a negotiated settlement. The Council of the Cree agreed to let the project go ahead in exchange for Canadian dollars and some land rights. They also asked for an environmental impact study.

Not surprisingly, the completed report stated that the James Bay Project would cause little or no damage to the environment. However, the Cree were not convinced.

"No one told us about mercury poisoning," says Henry Mistissini Cree. "It's easy for the government to say 'Don't worry' when it's been our staple diet for thousands of years"

Since work started on the first phase of the giant James Bay Project, flooding of land to create reservoirs has led to mercury poisoning on a frightening scale. Some of the elders from the community at the mouth of the La Grande River, have developed the classic symptoms of mercury poisoning: shaking, numbness of limbs, loss of peripheral vision, and damage. In 1984, a year before the completion of the first

