

# Land of the Deep Water People

by Cynthia Ruhnke

Living in such an expansive country, Canadians have a tendency to localize their concerns. Southern Ontarians, in particular, seem oblivious to much of what happens north of Muskoka. Until recently, Temagami was one of those forgotten regions.

Located 150 km northeast of Sudbury, this richly forested area is home to the 1,000 member Teme-Augama Anishnabai Indian band.

There are many groups with renewed interest in Temagami. Most notable is the Canadian government, whose history with the area's natives has been nothing less than despotic and discriminatory. In 1984, the Ontario Supreme Court ruled, on the basis of the 1850 Robinson-Huron Treaty, that the Crown was entitled to ownership of the land. According to the natives, the treaty is not valid as it was never signed by a member of their band.

Four years after the Supreme Court ruling, the federal government conditionally offered to buy the land for \$30 million.

In 1971, the band received an official reserve and, more recently, was offered a larger area to the south. However, this area has been flooded and logged, and is hardly fit to economically support a native society.

The valuable trees found in Temagami have made the region attractive to several logging firms. Yet, although logging has been going in the area for a long time, the natives have finally decided to say "enough is enough."

The band is currently blocking the extension of Red Squirrel Road, a \$3.5 million project spearheaded by Ontario's Ministry of Natural Resources. The rest of the road must be built by December 31. On completion, it will provide access to 10,000 square km of wilderness.

Prior to the native blockade, an effort to stop construction was led by the Temagami Wilderness Society (TWS), a citizens' group of environmental activists dedicated to saving Temagami forests. TWS members and determined activists, like York student Macdonald Scott, have routinely trekked up to Temagami in order to impede construction. Over 100 people have been arrested over the course of the protests.

"As I was being put in the paddy wagon," said Scott, "I could see the cutovers of the areas they had supposedly selectively logged. You could see the destruction. It's amazing to go from the beautiful forest to a wasteland with one tree standing in the middle."

In one attempt to block construction, TWS's executive director Brian Back was buried up to his neck in the path of the road. After several hours, his body temperature dropped and he had to be pulled from the ground.

Popularity of the Temagami issue is due, in part, to waves of environmental concern inspired by the media. At a rally held October 29, nearly 1,000 protesters marched from Nathan Phillips Square to Queen's Park. They carried a canoe and wore t-shirts with catchy slogans like "Temagami Chainsaw Massacre." New Democrat leader Bob Rae, who was arrested in Temagami, also attended.

Despite its label as a white, middle-class movement, the effort to save Temagami is genuine, and not simply an attempt to salvage cottage country.

A large part of the environmental mandate is the preservation of old-growth red and white pine. In the TWS's Autumn Wilderness Report, Dr. Terry Carleton, professor of forestry and botany at UofT, states, "We are destroying the last remaining old-growth red and white pine ecosystems in Ontario that we know of."

Dr. Peter Quinby, of Wilfrid Laurier University, points out in the report that, "These old-growth pine ecosystems should be preserved for scientific study." He also explains that, "They should be protected because they maintain water quality and soil stability, they retain large amounts of nutrients, they provide valuable genetic material and they provide important wildlife habitat."

A key factor in logging is reforestation, which is essential for survival and regeneration. Unfortunately, the industry's poor reforestation record has left many skeptical of the future. A 1985 provincial auditor's report revealed that only two-thirds of the reforested areas (half the size of the original forest) were successfully replanted.

Regrowth in the Temagami area is particularly difficult because of the harsh climate. Fire is also a factor in the course of a dry northern summer, making it remarkable that the centuries-old red and white pine have survived. It is important that foresters, as well as environmentalists, recognize old-growth forests as a legitimate use of land, and not as a strictly economic commodity.

Near-sighted logging practices, claim the TWS, will destroy the old-

growth ecosystems which they consider 'blueprints' for future forests.

Also concerned with the outcome in Temagami are the many workers who rely on the region for employment. Not only are the workers concerned with short-term logging jobs, but they are facing the impending shutdown of Dofasco's iron-ore mine, the leading employer of the community's 1,100 members.

James Clancy of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union said, "One of the big difficulties of people up north and one of the reasons why the business elite is able to hold local populations at ransom, is that there are very few jobs other than exploiting resources. The reason for that is very simple. The business elite from Bay Street and Wall Street has run the north as an economic colony."

The native economic system is also threatened by logging activity in the north. Rodney Bobiwash, a member of the Mississagi Indian band and a professor of native studies at Trent University, described the logging road as "a 50 ft. strip of gravel pushed through the bush with destruction all around it. And that's being pushed through people's traplines, through people's fishing grounds, and it's giving access to moosehunters to kill game in an irresponsible manner."

On November 1, the Deep Water People issued eviction letters to the Temagami Wilderness Society, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Carman Construction. The band is now blocking Red Squirrel Road at either end until the December 31 construction deadline expires.

At times, it seems everyone has a vested interest in Temagami. But what the Teme-Augama Anishnabai have made us remember, is that the land we have studied, probed and profited from belongs to them.

As band leader Gary Potts explains, "The foundation of our blockade is, firstly, that land rights of the Teme-Augama Anishnabai have not yet been dealt with properly. Secondly, environmental mismanagement has reached a critical stage.

"The oppression of the Teme-Augama Anishnabai must stop, [and] the Ontario government must establish a meaningful process to attain a true treaty of co-existence, not surrender."

