

JAMES BAY

Power and Problems

by Paul Webster

"Canadians have to realize that environmental disasters don't only happen in the Brazilian rainforest. Hydroelectric development is destroying wildlife and killing my people and eventually we will all be the victims." According to Matthew Coon-Come, the Grand Chief of the Crees of Québec, the James Bay Hydroelectric Project is an example of the kind of megaprojects which must be stopped "if we as a people, as a planet, want to survive."

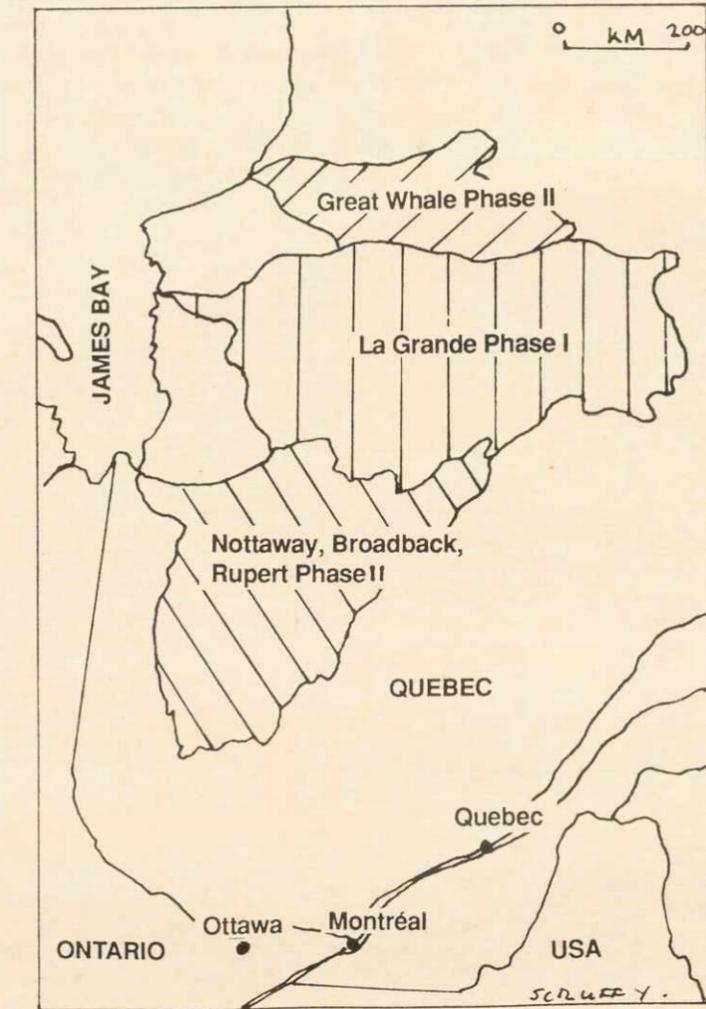
Mr. Coon-Come speaks with some authority on the subject. His people have for thousands of years been part of the delicate ecological balance of "Eeyou Astchee" (the people's homeland) of Northern Québec. Since 1970 Hydro-Québec has been turning his homeland into huge reservoirs. 215 dams and dikes were created by pouring 155 million cubic metres of landfill and 550 000 tonnes of concrete into the ancient rivers of the Cree homeland. More than 10 000 square kilometres of new lakes, five airports, 15 workcamps, 1500 km of roads and 5562 km of power lines were built in order to enable Phase One of the Project to come on-line in 1984.

After signing a Treaty in 1975 which promised that beyond this there would be no further intrusion into the Cree homeland, Hydro-Québec began planning to double the Project by 1998. Phase II will increase the amount of land affected to an area roughly the size of British Columbia.

James Bay Phase I had a clearly adverse impact on the 10 000 Cree dislocated by the project. Traditional hunting lands, and dozens of habitations were submerged. The flooding released huge amounts of mercury from rotting vegetation and soil which has poisoned the entire northern Québec ecosystem. The Cree could no longer live off the land. Many continued to try, and died prematurely.

The Cree went to the cities to fight Bourassa's 1972 statement, "Québec must occupy its territory: it must occupy James Bay". They failed to halt the Project, but they succeeded in winning the largest land settlement in Canadian history. They were given \$136 million for an area the size of England.

The Project had the effect of putting Hydro-Québec on the map. The utility went from having 12 000 employees, assets worth \$3.5 billion and debts of \$3.4 billion in 1970 to having 23 000 employees, assets valued at \$34 billion and debts of \$23 billion in 1990. In the process it became the motor of the Québec economy, in cooperation with electric-intensive industries like Alcan aluminum. According to many economists, James Bay severely impeded Québec's industrial diversification. Hélène O'Connor Lajambe, executive director of the Université du Québec a Montréal's Centre d'Analyse des Politiques Énergétiques says that the dependency on subsidized hydro and aluminum export revenues



is creating "a Third World type economy" in Québec.

Most ominous, however, are the environmental impacts of the Project. Most of these were, like the mercury poisoning, unanticipated because there was no environmental assessment conducted before the project was started. Later assessments were done by Lavalin, the contracting engineers who made a fortune from the Project.

Mercury poisoning and habitat flooding have ravaged wildlife. According to Jan Beyen, a senior staff scientist at the New York-based National Audubon Society "in terms of wildlife and habitat, James Bay is the equivalent of the destruction of the tropical rainforest".

In 1984, when 10 000 Caribou drowned in a river tributary to a Project reservoir, Hydro-Québec was not interested in discussing the disaster. Critics of the Project point to the Caribou decimation as the most visible wildlife impact. The real dimensions of the tragedy, they argue, can never be known.

The flooding of millions of hectares of forest is seen both as a terrible loss of oxygen supply and an enormous contribution, from rotting trees, to the release of carbon-dioxide, a greenhouse gas. "Hydro-Québec is taking a vast territory noted for its running water and turning it into a vast territory of stagnant reservoirs, virtual toxic

sinks for pollutants in the air. It is complete and utter madness", says Daniel Green, a spokesperson for the Québec environmental group La Société Pour Vaincre la Pollution.

The Project's most ominous environmental impact came when, in 1981, the LG4 reservoir was filled with the weight of 19 billion cubic metres of water from the Caniapsu river, which once flowed north and now flows south. A warning shift occurred in the earth's crust.

Because Phase II of the Project promises to dramatically increase the scale of the problems which have emerged from Phase I, Federal Environment Minister Robert de Cotrêt has insisted on an assessment under the 1984 Environment Act. Meanwhile however, construction for the new phase has begun. The Grand Council of the Crees is challenging this in court. They argue that as in the 1970s, once the investment is made, it's much harder to stop the Project.

Political critics of the Project, like Maude Barlow, Chair of the Council of Canadians, argue that the Mulroney Government will never close down Bourassa's dream: to do so would irreparably damage Ottawa's relations with the Province. In a speech in Halifax in November 1990 Barlow suggested that Bourassa had supported Free Trade in 1988 in exchange for Mulroney's commitment not to interfere with James Bay.

Phase II has precipitated a new round of organized opposition. Environmentalists continue to insist that the Project will destroy huge new tracts of forest habitat, release great plumes of poisonous mercury into James and Hudson Bays, and create huge volumes of greenhouse gasses. The Crees have ripped up their 1975 Treaty, because, in Mr. Coon-Come's words "the agreement was based on the assumption that hydroelectric development was compatible with the Cree way of life and the environment, but that is obviously not true."

Alan Penn, an environmental consultant with the Cree Grand Council and director of environmental impact studies for the Cree Regional Authority, insists that the Project has allowed Québécois to become massive energy wasters. Québécois "are unique in the number of kilowatt hours used...in 1988, approximately 24 000 per capita" he said in a recent speech at McGill University. Conservation, he argues, is not on Hydro-Québec's agenda.

Hydro-Québec has also come under attack for its corporate principles. Economists like O'Connor Lajambe argue that because it is a crown corporation it is responsible to no one in explaining, for example, why half its revenues go to provide interest payments on debt. "Hydro-Québec is among the least [open] utilities in the world" O'Connor Lajambe says, "it appears for an average of two days a

year to present a report to a legislative committee which has almost no research budget and is not entitled to produce outside witnesses".

The list of problems with Hydro-Québec and James Bay continues. Anti-separatists argue that the project is part of the agenda for Québec independence, and that Nationalist Québec politicians are thus willing to forgive its sins. Trade critics argue that as a subsidized exporter, Hydro-Québec is violating the Free Trade Agreement in some areas. Tom Adams, a utility analyst for Energy Probe, says "Hydro-Québec has access to falling water for free, even though it is a scarce and valuable commodity. Nowhere else is that right given for free." He also points out that the utility pays no taxes.

The seriousness of the social, environmental and economic problems associated with the James Bay Project are on a scale of grandeur proportionate with the size of the Project itself. Until now Hydro-Québec has been able to use its political and economic power to overcome all opponents.

Last week in Vermont, however, two communities voted to reject the purchase of Québec electricity. They did so out of concern for the environment and the lives of the Cree. Environmentalists and the Cree have been lobbying North-eastern U.S. hydro consumers not to buy Québec power. Their success in Vermont may be an indication that Hydro-Québec can be stopped.

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