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Social implications of the development of the James Bay Power giant

Under contract to the Quebec provincial government, a team of anthropologists composed of Dr. Richard F. Salisbury, Fernand G. Filion and Donald Stewart from McGill University, Montreal, has produced a report on the socio-economic implications of a \$6-billion hydro-electric project which involves the harnessing of five large rivers flowing into the James Bay area of Northern Quebec. The Cree Indians who inhabit the area are greatly concerned about the effects of this massive development on their lives. The report takes an objective look at the future of these people over the next ten years to establish whether the hydro-electric project will be environmentally and sociologically detrimental, or whether, on the contrary, it might entail advantages for the Cree.

At full capacity, the report observes, the project could produce three times the power of Churchill Falls in Labrador, now the biggest hydro-electric installation in North America. It involves the construction of four huge hydro dams, which will result in the flooding of 3,000 square miles of lowlands. The area may then be opened up to mining and pulp-and-paper development.

Since the approval of a bill in May 1971 by the Quebec National Assembly establishing the James Bay Development Corporation, major opposition has arisen from four groups: the Cree Indians of the area, their supporters (white and Indian) in other areas, environmental specialists and those who feel the proposed development and the creation of jobs are illusions, and have been proposed only for political purposes. The Cree, who are adamantly opposed to the development, feel that the area belongs to them; they were not consulted before the decision was made, and they consider that the project will destroy their livelihood

and way of life, which is centred around the hunting and wildlife of the region.

The report brings together what is known about the social life of Indians and whites in the James Bay region of Quebec and analyzes the probable conditions there in 1980 if life continues without a hydro-electric development. It also considers the plan of the James Bay Development Corporation to establish what social and economic changes would occur over the next eight years as a result of the project.

Background of region

The Cree population of the James Bay Region was 5,772 at the end of 1970. In 1945 the population had begun to increase rapidly and it is the adults born at that time who now require jobs. An increase in high-school students is also expected over the next few years and this will bring a need for improved educational facilities. Although at present few adults speak English, in ten years time most adults will be able to speak and read English and will be able to take jobs where English is needed. By 1980, the total Cree population will have grown to 7,352 and, whereas in 1971 there were only 1,250 men of working age, by 1980 there will be 1,675. At the peak of the hydro-electric project in 1977, 11,950 workers will be required, most of whom will be white but some of whom could be Indian.

Hunting — a way of life

The James Bay region is one of the last areas in North America where native people have been able successfully to continue a hunting way of life without the young Indians being attracted away to the big cities to work. Some 80 per cent of the adult male population hunt for cash or food. Each area has different food resources — moose, beaver, fish, wildfowl, small game, seals, caribou — and the proportion of the total food supply coming