

Oil and Cree

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As the pace of oil sands development is similar to a gold rush in the early century, the effects to the environment are not. These detrimental effects cause destruction towards the indigenous Cree who call Northern Alberta home as their identity, survival and livelihood is connected land.

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As oil is the life line to economies one would think that the new Oil Sands developments in northern Alberta's woodlands would be a very positive development as money and jobs flood the region but when one listens to the people who actually call this place home one would find a very contrary view. For the Woodland Cree peoples of northern Alberta, who have been living a subsistence lifestyle for thousands of years, the Oil Sands expansion is a direct threat to their existence. The threat being the environmental destruction and thus a loss of culture and Cree identity attached to the land. The Canadian government's record of neglect for first nations is further showcased in their *liaise faire* attitude towards the region of Alberta as the government has essentially allowed the oil companies to exploit the land with only minor legal regard towards the indigenous Cree. From the area the largest organized response comes from the Mikisew Cree First Nation. Melody Lepine, a spokes person for the Mikisew Cree, explained "the biggest problem in dealing with the oil companies is capacity" as the Cree nation is rather limited in resources when compared the bountiful industry of oil. (Lepine, 2008) The Mikisew have concluded since their subsistence lifestyle has been demolished by environmental destruction that as a result both levels of government have by de facto extinguished the Treaty Rights of the Mikisew. (Response to OSS, 2007)

The Mikisew Cree have continuously inhabited the Athabasca oil soaked sands of the territory in what is called today Fort Chipewyan and surrounding territory. Their boarders extend north of the Northwest Territories, east of Saskatchewan, west of British Columbia and south to the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo Park. Hunting, fishing, trapping and gathering has formed the basis of the Mikisew Cree subsistence lifestyle. This subsistence lifestyle is not a myth, and is not a thought of the past. The Mikisew Cree's continued existence and reliance on these lands are very much alive. Summer camps near waterways were bases for moose hunting,

fishing, and berry picking. In winter, Mikisew Cree members lived in log cabins and shack settlements near hunting and trapping grounds or near smaller trading posts following contact with western settlers. The Mikisew Cree livelihoods allowed for no permanent residence to this day thus residence are taken up in multiple surroundings and not restricted to a sedentary lifestyle. (Lawe, Wells, 2005)

The effects of high pace Oil Sands development have caused destruction to the Albertan waterways, lakes and animal life. At stake are precious living ecosystems, the survival of the Mikisew Cree culture, and the economic and physical well-being of the First Nation people. Oil sands leases cover over half of the Mikisew Cree's traditional lands. (Lawe, Wells, 2005) The scale of ecological devastation is on a scale that has never been seen and experienced in North America. The oil sands development, in combination with the effects of the W.A.C. Bennett Dam and other demands on the Athabasca River, has and will significantly reduce the ability of the Mikisew Cree people to live of the land. (Response to OSS, 2007) The Mikisew Cree has seen a general decline in all wildlife over the past 40 years and the commercial fishing season this year was cut due to the low numbers of fish. With waterway and land pollution come the destruction of traditional hunting sites and spiritual gathering places. Language and important traditions are not being passed to younger Mikisew Cree generations because Elders are not able to traverse the land. Given these existing impacts on culture, community and lands and the prospect of more intense oil sands development in future years, everything is at stake for the Mikisew Cree. (Lawe, Wells, 2005)

"From our standpoint the largest problem that we are dealing with is capacity" said Melody Lepine from the Mikisew Cree IRC. The Industry Relations Corporation (IRC) is a Mikisew Cree department that has been in existence since January 2001. (Lepine, 2008) The

IRC, as directed by the Mikisew Cree Leadership, acts as a liaison between resource developers and operators, government agencies, and the community, where appropriate. Melody continued as she explained that from their stand point capacity is an issue because the Mikisew don't have the resources to deal with the fast pace developments that the Alberta government is letting go unchecked. The Alberta government is allowing developments to happen without any regard or input from the first nations who live there. This vacancy has left the Mikisew with the monumental task as stewards of the land, a place the government should but is not present, when they don't have the capacity to take on. Thus for Melody the issue is the call on the government to act on their behalf to ensure their rights and privileges are protected as outlined in their treaty agreements. Melody then expanded about how the Alberta government is not stepping up and assessing the environmental impact and regulating the corporations. She also mentioned how timelines are inundated with development as corporations continue to expand projects. The fast pace has lead to, on the Alberta government side, the hiring of outside consultants to relay government policy issues. In summary Melody sees her nation under capacity constraints in dealing with the corporations as the government is laying aside and not meeting its obligations to the treaty in protecting the first nation's interests on a legal level and a moral one too. (Lepine, 2008)

Today the Canadian public does not hear the calls for help that the Cree people have so desperately let out. Today the environment of Alberta is at risk along with the Cree people's way of life and existence. Since oil is the world's number one traded commodity the oil industry has amassed a great wealth of resources and power. The result of which is their ability to exploit the lands of the Athabasca oil sands by bypassing the government. The government has in effect done nothing to develop the Oil Sand's resources in an ecological sound way to the benefit of the

indigenous Cree who live their. The government has done nothing to protect the interest of the first nations Cree as obligated to them in their treaty they signed. This being said the clear message from this paper is that The Cree people of northern Alberta are under attack as their environment is being altered and the government is doing nothing to stop this injustice.

Bibliography

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