



ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM ON THE GROUND: Small Green and Indigenous Organizing

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Marmion Lake Generating Station: Another Northern Scandal?

Tobasonakwut Peter Kinew¹

Twenty miles west of Atikokan, in northwestern Ontario, lies the Ojibway reserve of Seine River, a community of about 500 people who have traditionally made their livelihood hunting, trapping and fishing. More recently, logging and tourist guiding have been introduced. Although they live within commuting distance of the iron ore mines of Atikokan, Seine River people have not benefited from this development.

About 80 air miles southwest of Seine River is another Ojibway village of about 150 people. Lac La Croix is situated on the northwest edge of the wilderness of Quetico Provincial Park, and is accessible only by air and water. There, the people continue to live the traditional way, supplementing their income only by seasonal construction work and some guiding.

Last fall, both these communities became aware of the coal-fired generating station Ontario Hydro proposes to build at Marmion Lake, seven miles outside the town of Atikokan. The first phase of the 800-megawatt plant is scheduled to begin operation in September, 1983 and the plant should be fully operational in fall, 1984.

Ontario Hydro asserts that the corporation undertook a public participation program to involve fully the people of the area. No one in Seine River or Lac La Croix heard of the project until the fall of 1977—three months before construction was to begin, three months after the Ontario

government had given the project final approval and one year after the government had exempted the project from any review under the 1975 Ontario Environmental Assessment Act.

The Grand Council Treaty No. 3, an organization of Chiefs of the 25 reserves in the Treaty No. 3 part of northwestern Ontario, met with the two communities to discuss the project and the effects of the plant's effluent on the land and on wildlife. How would trapping, hunting, fishing, logging, wild rice picking, and the tourist camps be affected? Through the years the people had witnessed the effects of other developments. Sturgeon had become extinct because of the wood fibre pollution from log drives along the river. Other fishing and trapping had been spoiled by raised water levels from dams erected to assist iron ore mining. And the people had shared the suffering of neighbouring communities affected by development, notably Grassy Narrows, Whitedog and Lac Seul.

As a starting point from which to address the Ontario government, Treaty No. 3 Chiefs Council chose to bring the issue to the Ontario Royal Commission on the Northern Environment (the Hartt Commission) at its hearings in northern Ontario. On the third day of the hearings in Dryden, Ontario, Treaty No. 3 presented its argument:

While the proposed power plant will meet the sulphur dioxide standards of Canada and Ontario, the project will violate the U.S. and Minnesota standards. . . . If the Ontario government has its way, there will be no careful examination of the serious potential environmental consequences of their power plant. . . . The sulphur dioxide emissions will snuff out the life of many of our lakes. . . .

Your duty is to make the government of Ontario abide by its own law—namely the Environmental Assessment Act. Your credibility will be greatly enhanced if you can convince the government that it is eminently reasonable . . . to have the International Joint Commission hear evidence on Ontario Hydro's Atikokan project.²

Prof. J. R. Kramer, a biologist at McMaster University and consultant to the International Joint Commission, appeared before the Hartt inquiry to

state his concern about the buffering capacity of the lakes in northwestern Ontario. Pollutant levels, said Kramer, “will probably double by the year 2000 without any SO₂ emission scrubbing and will probably stay the same with the state of the art of technological abatement. . . . Emissions from proposed development must be considered as adding to the background which is at present marginal for most susceptible lakes. Therefore, any additions to this background must be carefully considered.”³

Justice Hartt requested that Ontario Hydro respond to Treaty No. 3 at a later hearing. Three weeks later, in Nakina, Ontario, Hydro related that the projected was conceived after the government decided in 1973 that further generation facilities were needed in Ontario Hydro West System. Atikokan was the chosen site and, following some environmental studies undertaken by Hydro, Acres Consulting, and Proctor-Redfern, the site was acquired and Cabinet exempted Ontario Hydro from the provisions of the Environmental Assessment Act because of its “advanced stage of planning prior to the proclamations of the Act.”⁴ Hydro did not respond directly to the concerns of Treaty No. 3, and the Native group again called on Hartt to intervene by calling a direct meeting between Hydro and representatives of Treaty No. 3.

On December 8, 1977, Justice Hartt convened a meeting between three representatives of Treaty No. 3 and three representatives of Hydro, including the corporation’s chairman, Robert Taylor. Hydro reiterated its stand that all laws had been complied with, all environmental standards would be met, and that the cost of installing scrubbers (capital costs \$60 million; annual operating cost, \$8–10 million) would be unjustified and financially irresponsible. Treaty No. 3 would have to address itself directly to Cabinet, said Hydro.

At this point, Treaty No. 3 went to the press. Both the *Toronto Star* and the *Ottawa Citizen* ran stories about the concern over acid rain fallout as a result of SO₂ emissions, and about the possibility of mercury releases into lakes in the affected area. An NBC-TV news program followed up by coming to the Treaty No. 3 area, filming the people of Lac La Croix at work on the land, and talking with them about the possible effects of the plant. The story was broadcast in the United States on March 4, 1978, but by then other developments were in the offing.

The United States have been making representations to both the Ontario and federal governments since 1976 about the possibility that SO₂ emissions would exceed state and federal pollution levels for the wilderness area on the border south of Quetico Park, the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, classified as Class I, or “pristine.” American officials were pressing Ontario Hydro to include scrubbers (flue gas desulphurization equipment) in the design of the plant. Hydro had consistently refused, arguing that its own precautions were enough—incorporation of a 650-foot stack, precipitators claimed to be 99.5% efficient, and the use of low-sulphur coal from Alberta.

These very same precautions were used by the Saskatchewan Power Corporation in the design of its Poplar Hill Plant. The International Joint Commission has judged them not adequate to protect the environment.

On January 17, 1978, Treaty No. 3 again appeared before Justice Hartt, asking him to restore some sanity to the deliberations and to recommend a public inquiry with strong Native input into the planning of the generating station at Marmion Lake. Further evidence of the need for scrubbers was presented.

Let us now consider the arguments put forward by Ontario Hydro. Ontario Hydro has stated that it will cost too much to install the scrubbers at Marmion Lake, but now we have a formula available to assess how much it will cost *not* to install scrubbers. A federal government study was recently released of the costs the public must bear for the decision to allow the Sudbury Nickel operations to dump 4½ thousand tons of sulphur dioxide a day into the Sudbury air. The cost to the public in terms of health and environmental damage, was almost four hundred and fifty million dollars a year.

Let us now apply the same formula to the Marmion Lake project. The sulphur content of western sub-bituminous coal is 0.53%. The potential sulphur dioxide emissions from this coal would be about 1%, by weight, of the coal burnt. At Marmion Lake, Hydro expects to burn an average of 2.5 million tons of coal a year, or about 68,500 tons of coal a day. This means that Ontario Hydro will be pump-

ing about 685 tons of SO₂ into the Northwestern Ontario and Minnesota environment each and every day. If we now apply the formula used in the assessment of SO₂ damages in the Sudbury area to Marmion Lake, we find that the cost to the public will be over 60 million dollars per year. Consider the fact that it will cost Ontario Hydro 70 million dollars to install the special equipment needed to scrub their fumes clean. I would suggest that Ontario Hydro would have the cost of their scrubbers paid off in less than two years if they are only willing to take into account the social, environmental and health costs the people of Northwestern Ontario will be forced to pay.

One other point, in Scandinavia, fish biologists were puzzled by the unexpectedly high mercury levels in fish in a lake where no mercury had been dumped. The natural mercury in the environment was no greater in this lake than in the lakes of Scandinavia without a mercury problem. The Scandinavian scientist concluded that acid rain had fallen on the high mercury lake. The acid rain had caused an unusual amount of mercury to escape into the atmosphere and be absorbed by the fish. As you know, we have far too much mercury in our river systems already. We do not need any more.⁵

Atikokan residents appeared before a subcommittee of the International Joint Commission—the Upper Great Lakes Reference Group—at a December meeting in Thunder Bay to express their concern regarding the pollution from the plant. Meanwhile, Hydro hit the Thunder Bay papers with threats of power outages in northwestern Ontario until Marmion Lake generating station, and an extension of a Thunder Bay station, were completed. Support for the Treaty No. 3 position, and for that of northern environmentalists, came at that time from the President of the Kenora District Camp-owners Association. He expressed fears that the pronouncements of Hydro and the Ontario Government “smelled like another mercury decision. . . . if there is no problem as we are led to believe,

we must ask why the Vice-President of the United States is going to Ottawa to discuss this issue with the Prime Minister.”⁶

In January, the United States, Minnesota, Canada and Ontario held their second meeting as planned in August 1977 to discuss the studies they had made on the Marmion Lake plant with the information they had shared. The US continued to press for the installation of scrubbers, a proposal which Hydro rejected. Both sides discussed plans for monitoring of the plant for both air and water pollution, and the fact that Hydro would be willing to take corrective action if needed—and would be obliged to do so under the Ontario Environmental Protection Act of 1971. Although a joint statement was issued indicating some agreement, the US asked Canada to consider referring the project to the IJC for study. The importance of this request—and the immense amount of political pressure being drummed up in the US for this review—was emphasized by the fact that Vice-President Mondale had discussed this issue with Prime Minister Trudeau during an Ottawa visit the week before.

Ontario Hydro came out publicly against any further delay, and construction began on schedule in January 1978. The Ontario Ministry of Energy withdrew provincial support for any further talks with the Americans. The *Toronto Star* reported that “the ministry’s tough stance may influence a series of other trans-boundary pollution disputes from coast to coast.”⁷ And an IJC recommendation on the Poplar River generating station in Saskatchewan prompted speculation that “the IJC appeal to halt construction on the Saskatchewan project may only harden Ontario’s resolve to shun the acknowledged avenues of cross-border difficulties.”⁸ Although Saskatchewan still held out hope for an agreement on the western project, the outlook for Ontario was not good: “In future, similar projects may have to wait for a complete environmental study before construction can begin.”⁹

Near the end of March, the federal government announced that it was rejecting the notion of an IJC review of the Marmion Lake project. At the beginning of April the Hartt Commission tabled its interim report to the Ontario Legislature. The report did not recommend an environmental assessment of the project—only that “the government of Ontario should immediately provide comprehensive information on the planned Atikokan Generating Station, and in consultation with local affected people and

communities, ensure public discussion of this information to promote understanding of the project and its possible environmental effects.”¹⁰

The people of Seine River and Lac La Croix appeared to be losing the battle.

On April 6 it was learned—again through the press—that “Canadian officials were astonished to learn that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is doing a study on the possible environmental effects of Atikokan (GS [generating station]) without Canada having been informed.”¹¹ It seemed Minnesota congressmen had convinced Secretary of State Cyrus Vance that the study had to be done as a basis for a firmer negotiating position with Canada. Treaty No. 3 felt it ironic that its interests were being protected by a foreign government better than by Canada’s.

Some very basic questions about Atikokan remain unanswered.

1. *Is this power source necessary?*

Ontario Hydro claims that the station is required to meet the needs of the 1980’s. Yet existing possibilities and trends in the area of alternative sources of energy in the north have been ignored. More and more pulp and paper operations—by far the largest consumers of power in north-western Ontario—are turning to wood wastes as fuel. Conservation is becoming part of our national consciousness. Many northerners are trying wood fuel, solar energy and wind power. And two energy-eaters—the iron ore mines at Atikokan—are scheduled to close down three years before the Marmion Lake station opens. And a new Manitoba government may be more willing to consider continuation of Ontario’s present power purchase agreements with that province.

2. *How can the effects of sulphur dioxide on vegetation and people be offset? How can the process of mercury releases from rocks due to sulphur dioxide emissions be stopped?*

The only answer seems to be scrubbers. They would effectively remove almost all sulphur dioxide from the plant’s emissions. Indian people have seen the devastation that mercury has wrought in the communities of Whitedog and Grassy Narrows. In the words of a Whitedog leader, Tony Henry, “[Indian people] wish to ensure that any future industrial

development must only be considered once all voices have been heard and evaluated. . . . Anything destructive or potentially life-endangering must not be carried out.”

3. *How can Native people be truly involved in a public participation program?*

Ontario Hydro’s public participation process is a sham. The first step in the Marmion Lake case was to have a committee of “representative” people from the Thunder Bay area review six sites for a coal generating station. As Thunder Bay residents wanted no part of the attendant pollution, all six were rejected. Under political pressure to save Atikokan from economic extinction when the iron mines close (in 1979 or 1980), the Marmion Lake site was chosen. It was not on Hydro’s list of six sites.

The only meetings held in the town took place after the project site had been purchased and the project exempted from the Environmental Assessment Act. No attempt was ever made to contact nearby Indian reserves. The environmental impact statements prepared by consulting firms considered only the town of Atikokan, not any of the effects on health and livelihood of nearby communities, either white or Indian.

4. *Where were the environmental interest groups when we needed them?*

When the native communities found out about the Marmion Lake generating station, it was almost too late to act. It was an uphill battle with government and Hydro, and even interesting the media in the issue at such a late stage was difficult.

Yet it was later learned that representatives of the Environment North group in Thunder Bay were on the original review committee which decided against the six sites and allowed the Marmion Lake site to be chosen. Representatives of Energy Probe in Toronto attended at least one public participation meeting of Hydro’s in Atikokan about five months before Cabinet gave final approval to the project. Yet no one from these groups contacted the nearby reserves or the Treaty No. 3 organization.

There was, and is, a potential for a strong alliance between environmental and native groups—but only if information is shared and

continuous contact established. It may take more effort and time to work with people from another culture. But were environmental groups founded only to work with the white, middle class? Or is the real object to protect the land and the people—all the people?

Notes

- 1 “Marmion Lake Generating Station” is reprinted with permission of the family of the late Tobasonakwut Peter Kinew and AlternativesJournal.ca (A/J). The author’s name appeared in *Alternatives* 7, no. 4 [1978] as Peter Kelley. Indian Affairs gave his family the surname Kelly, but he returned to his traditional name in the 1990s. The author’s original biography included with the article read: “Peter Kelley is Chief of the Sabaskong Reserve, situated on Lake of the Woods halfway between Kenora and Fort Frances and the Area Tribal Chief for the Grand Council Treaty No. 3.”

As this article has been reprinted, we chose to preserve the original formatting and content in its entirety and without revision.

- 2 Submission of Grand Council Treaty No. 3 to Royal Commission on the Northern Environment (RCNE), Dryden, November 1977.
- 3 Kramer to RCNE, Dryden, November 1977.
- 4 Ontario Hydro, “Supplementary statement to RCNE,” Nakina, November 28, 1977.
- 5 Grand Council Treaty No. 3 submission to RCNE, Kenora, January 17, 1978.
- 6 “Plant concerns KDAC President,” *Kenora Miner and News*, January 31, 1978.
- 7 “Angry Ontario cuts pollution talks with US,” *Toronto Star*, January 22, 1978.
- 8 “Poplar River development may harden Ontario opposition to an IJC study of Atikokan,” *Eco/Log Week*, February 10, 1978.
- 9 “Environmental factors may block SPC plant,” *Globe and Mail*, March 9, 1978.
- 10 Interim Report of RCNE, April 1978, p. 15.
- 11 “US is told of Canada’s concern over proposals for dam project,” *Globe and Mail*, April 6, 1978. [This is a paraphrase rather than a direct quotation from the article authored by John Picton – eds.].

