Keepers of the land, in whose hands?
Community responses to Hydroelectrical dams in Northern Manitoba.

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Abstract

This research project was an opportunity to give context to hydroelectric development impacts in the light of sovereign community responses. The communities of focus were Tataskweyak Cree Nation (TCN) and O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation (OPCN). The impacts of hydro-development have been vast to both the environment and the people, particularly impacting cultural land practices and hence the identity of a people. Members of both communities have shared historical, community, and personal accounts of these impacts, in a bid to have a complete narrative of the impacts of hydroelectric development on a way of life. Various case studies of community responses to these impacts have been featured to showcase the resilience of a people. Particularly to show the ways in which actions of sovereignty are actions to reinstate identity in the face of these impacts.

This thesis was a collaborative research effort with members of Tataskweyak Cree Nation and O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation directing the weight and application of themes within this research. The research aimed to highlight the long-standing social impacts of hydro as well as the various aspects of sovereignty used in responding to these impacts. This research used qualitative research methods, specifically narrative analysis, storytelling, thematic analysis, and discourse analysis, to achieve the research goals. Along with interviews from Knowledge Keepers, Land Users, and Elders, this research also carried out an analysis of archival records from the Clean Environment Commission and other sources.

According to OPCN and TCN members, hydroelectric development impacts have often focused on the impacts to the land and water, leaving out the impacts on culture and ways of being. These environmental impacts have often overshadowed the social impacts that are key to the well-being of the featured Cree communities and their cultures. It is hoped that this thesis will broaden the understanding of the socioeconomic impacts of hydro development within the context of culture, practice, and identity, while highlighting sovereign community responses.

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Omnis gloria in deo. All glory to God.

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Definitions

AFP- Augmented Flow Program

CEC- Clean Environment Commission

CRD- Churchill River Diversion

LWR – Lake Winnipeg Regulation

NFA – Northern Flood Agreement

NFC – Northern Flood Committee

RCEA – Regional Cumulative Effects Assessment

Chapter 1: Introduction

Problem Statement

The Province of Manitoba derives a significant proportion of its electricity from renewable hydroelectric sources, producing surplus energy (Manitoba Government, 2024), while providing the majority of its population with cost-effective, secure (Hoffman, Bryne, Martinez, & Glover, 2002) and consistent power distribution (Manitoba Hydro, 2024). However, the externalized costs of hydroelectric development are disproportionately borne by Indigenous communities in the province's northern regions (Thompson, 2015; Hoffman, Bryne, Martinez, & Glover, 2002; Manitoba Clean Environment Commission, 2018). In Canada, the term Indigenous peoples covers First Nations, Metis, and Inuit (Government of Canada, 2024). This research worked closely with two First Nations. A First Nation is a specific legal identity created by the Indian *Act* in 1876 to define who would be considered Indian.

The area of focus was the multifaceted impacts of hydro development and the sovereignty-based responses in Northern Manitoba. Specifically in two Cree communities, Tataskweyak Cree Nation (TCN), and O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation (OPCN), which will be shown to have experienced various forms of dispossession to accommodate extensive hydroelectric development (Hoffman, Bryne, Martinez, & Glover, 2002).

The construction and operation of hydroelectric infrastructure necessitates substantial environmental modifications, including flooding of upstream territories for reservoir creation and the artificial manipulation of downstream water flows (Manitoba Clean Environment Commission, 2018). For Indigenous peoples whose cultural and historical lifeways are intrinsically connected to the land, these anthropogenic alterations have caused severe disruptions to both their economic subsistence practices and cultural identities (Neckoway, 2018). Following skewed negotiation processes, these communities have received limited benefits from the flooding compensation agreements and minimal opportunities for meaningful economic participation in these development projects (Neckoway, 2018). The resultant inability to engage in historical practices such as fishing, trapping, and hunting has pushed these communities to be partners in economic partnerships that inherently privilege established industrial interests (Neckoway, 2018). To counter these impacts and power imbalances, communities are taking actions to assert their sovereignty.

Community Background

In 1974, five communities formed an alliance known as the Northern Flood Committee (NFC) to negotiate the Northern Flood Agreement (NFA). These communities were Tataskweyak (Split Lake) Cree Nation, Kiche Waskihekan (York Landing) First Nation, Nisichawayasihk (Nelson House) Cree Nation, at the time combined with South Indian Lake, now O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation, Pimicikamak (Cross Lake) First Nation, and Kinosao Sipi (Norway House) First Nation. When the NFA was initially signed in 1977, there were approximately 8000 individuals directly impacted by hydro development plans; 47 years later, that number has risen exponentially. This research focuses on Tataskweyak Cree Nation and South Indian Lake Cree Nation, the experiences and stories of the individuals who live there.

Tataskweyak Cree Nation (TCN) is a Cree community of 4,235 registered people on the shore of Split Lake, northeast of Thompson, Manitoba (Government of Canada, 2024; Government of Canada, 2021). TCN sits on the Nelson River system. TCN is home to generations of hunters, trappers, and fishers. It is home to brave land and water rights advocates such as Robert Spence, Ila Disbrowe, and Jonothan Kitchekeesik, among other remarkable individuals who continue to practise cultural ways of hunting and animal preparation, such as Ivan Keeperr, and yet others who participate in the shoreline and debris clean-up programs to keep their waters navigable and safe for travel.

O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation (OPCN) is a Cree community of 1,839 registered people on the southeast shore of Southern Indian Lake in northern Manitoba, Canada. Fearlessly led by Chief Shirley at the time when interviews were conducted, the community continues to remain resilient in the face of its fisheries collapse (Government of Canada, 2021). While some continue to fish, such as prolific Mama Jo, some, like the fish plant manager, Calvin Baker, continue to keep the fishing plant running. Other fishermen, such as Les Dysart, have turned into advocates, challenging Manitoba Hydro and demanding accountability for failed agreements.

It is in these communities that this research is placed.

Positionality Statement

As a female and African Master's student in Environment at the University of Manitoba, my research on hydro-displacement in Indigenous communities is influenced by being impacted by hydro-development in Kenya, my immigrant background, and primarily city upbringing. My work is also based on my lived insights and lived experiences in Kenya and seven years of experience in Cree communities in Northern Manitoba as part of my work at Wa Ni Ska Tan: Alliance of Hydro-impacted communities. While my perspective may introduce biases, I actively and critically examined my assumptions, remaining open to unfamiliar, diverse, and challenging viewpoints. To mitigate bias, I centred the voices of directly impacted individuals. Power differentials were addressed by taking on a further position of humility and reciprocity. By acknowledging my positionality and committing to sharing pre-existing voices rather than "giving a voice", I navigated the complexities of cultural differences with integrity and accountability.

Research Question

This research investigated the multifaceted impacts associated with hydro-development in Northern Manitoba. Particularly, the aspects and role of power in negotiations, the cultural disruptions and responses in various forms of sovereignty. The lens of the research was through Community Member accounts of the interactions with industry/government in consultation, agreements, compensation, displacement, and post-displacement. Through several case studies, this research looked at the role of community sovereignty/involvement in decision-making and outcomes. In addition to standard frameworks of impact assessments, this study investigated psychological and spiritual responses to hydro development to better understand the intersections between identity, land use, and hydroelectric development on the Nelson River System. It also went beyond economic/market valuations of Cree land and investigated community/historical valuations based on land use and community/family heritage. To better understand this, the following questions must be answered

1. What is the history and extent of consent and participation in hydro-electrical projects in Manitoba?

2. What is the value of kinship to Indigenous Cree people (Ithenew) in the context of past and current hydro agreements?
3. What are some responses of sovereignty in land rights that address the various forms of impacts experienced?
4. How will multi-faceted approaches in understanding hydroelectric impact affect future responses to development?

Research Objectives and Goals

The goal of this proposed project was to document community accounts of impacts of hydro development as well as responses to hydro development in Northern Manitoba. The goal of the documentation is to provide an understanding of the nuances of hydro impacts, i.e., to provide a people-centred and complete understanding of hydro impacts. Another goal is to highlight community responses that reinforce the various components of sovereignty. This data is to be presented in a workshop and is available for reference when communities are approached by extraction-based and other industry. This document hopes to aid in land compensation negotiations for future extraction and hydro development projects.

The specific objectives are:

1. Outline the multi-faceted impacts of hydro "development" on individuals and communities, and environments in an accessible way.

2. Understand the different applications of sovereignty as resilient responses to hydro projects. Specifically, community sovereignty, research sovereignty, environmental sovereignty, and cultural sovereignty.

Chapter 2: Research Methodology

This research was rooted in Indigenous methodologies and western qualitative design. This research approach was chosen in order to be respectful, relational and ethical in both ways of knowing, understanding and practice.

In 2018, I started working with Wa Ni Ska Tan. During this work I had the opportunity to visit multiple hydro-impacted communities, including the three communities that are featured in this research. It was during these trips up north, and when community members would come to Winnipeg, that I formed relationships with participants of this research work. Although the relationships were impacted during COVID-19, they have since been revived. Hence, this research is a result of this long-term relationship building during prior visits. The candid discussions of expectations with interviewees ensured the research is carried out respectfully (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2001). In addition, the full transparency on the use and ownership of the data was a way that research participants and their knowledge were honoured alongside the sharing of tobacco.

Every aspect of this research was intentional in acknowledgment with Shawn Wilson's Research is Ceremony (Wilson, 2008). The research questions were drafted in consideration of the sensitivity of the topic at hand. The goal was to stop or minimize the possibility that participants would be re-traumatized during the interviews. The consideration of re-traumatization in the interview process was an adjustment made after the observations of reactions to interview questions at the end of early interviews. From this point, the potential for secondary trauma during the interview process was reduced by the nature of the questions. A methodological adjustment was made to primarily focus on what the participants wanted to discuss rather than steering the conversation based on research outcomes. The secondary priority was to focus more on resilience in the framing of questions. Additional adjustments included asking more about both individual and local experiences i.e. having the interview questions focused on community context as well as individual roles relating to land and water (Wilson, 2008).

At the beginning, the research was focused on improving conservation methods through environmental data collection by community members. This research topic shifted alongside community priorities. The change in topics shows the dynamism of community priorities and outcomes while offering relevant benefits and outcomes for community members. The research

outcomes are relevant to local experiences and can be used in other Canadian and Indigenous as considerations for future extractive economies, energy development, and for negotiations with hydroelectric dams. This work provides a framework for understanding the power dynamics that cause faults in current agreements as a learning for future generations. The use of data by future generations is only possible when all aspects of this work are made available. Going beyond making data available, I understand that this research is being done for the community and is owned by the community. I have had discussions with the various communities about where the data can be stored for current and future use.

This research implores the reader to listen to what is already being said by participants. It conveyed the messages without significant bias, centering participant voices as stories are being told. This was achieved by including direct contextual quotes in the analysis section as well as providing original recordings back to community members.

Prior to recording, consent forms and a discussion about expectations was had between the interviewer and interviewee. During this discussion, participants were asked if they would like to remain anonymous within transcripts and video recordings; according to adjustments were made. In addition, I mentioned that the interview could be stopped at any time of choosing. I also made sure to mention that they had indefinite control of their data from the beginning of the interview. Interviewees had full autonomy over their data in the process.

The philosophical foundation acknowledged critical realism's recognition of an objective reality while noting that our understanding of reality is socially and culturally situated (Creswell, 2009). This approach will allow us to merge physical and spiritual realities that are pillars of Indigenous Knowledge. While this study used inductive reasoning and grounded theory elements (Creswell, 2009), it left room for Indigenous Ways of knowing, allowing themes to emerge organically and unobstructed. The methodological framework allowed for multiple ways of knowing and being, recognized Indigenous knowledge systems independent of Western influences, used Western academic tools to support Indigenous perspectives and maintained Western academic tenets while being flexible to Indigenous cultures.

Methods

This study made use of qualitative research design methods, specifically narrative analysis, storytelling, thematic analysis, and discourse analysis to address the research question (Bradbury & Fetterman, 2015). The research focuses on various case studies, arranged within their relevant themes.

Data Collection

All data collection was carried out using Indigenous principles of ownership, control, access, and possession (OCAP) (The First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2024). Data for both data chapters was derived from both primary and secondary sources, ensuring a comprehensive analysis of themes. Primary data for this chapter consists of semi-structured interviews, including participant-led, unstructured, one-on-one interviews (Creswell, 2009) with community members conducted face-to-face. These interviews were conducted in 2022 with several members of OPCN and later in 2025 with four individuals working at the Stewardship Centre in Tataskweyak Cree Nation. Participants included Fishers, Hunters, Trappers, Elders, and Land or Water Protectors, all representing diverse peoples affected by hydro. These interviews explored experiences related to hydro development, hydro treaties, and resulting actions taken by communities. Interviewees spoke of their roles both as individuals affected and as community members of affected communities.

In TCN, the Stewardship Centre serves as the community's environmental monitoring and land management centre, coordinating research activities, traditional knowledge documentation, and compensation funding disbursement. These interviewees, who also serve as active long-term land users, possess firsthand knowledge of resource management and decision-making processes. The number of interview participants was limited, aligning with Indigenous research principles that prioritize depth of relationship and knowledge over broad sampling.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format that allowed for open-ended discussions while maintaining room to explore key experiences with sovereignty on land and water. Additional primary data emerged from ongoing relationship-building activities that began in 2017 through

working with Wa Ni Ska Tan: Alliance of Hydro Impacted Communities. These interactions, include participation in research activities, particularly in informal discussions surrounding the 2025 youth land-based camp at the school, provided contextual understanding that informed the data analysis process. While these conversations were not formally transcribed as interviews, presentations made during the community camp were transcribed and incorporated into the analysis to capture collective expressions of sovereignty.

Secondary sources were selected based on their relevance to key decision-making processes regarding hydro development, particularly focusing on the relevant case studies. Archived Clean Environment Commission hearing transcriptions, as well as the Regional Cumulative Effects Assessment, provided insight into regulatory and policy contexts pre-approval, while articles from various news platforms were incorporated based on their documentation of community responses to hydroelectric impacts. The study employed a methodological approach that integrated grounded theory principles with Indigenous research methodologies. This research used grounded theory's emphasis on allowing themes to emerge from participants and their perspectives while acknowledging the need for sovereignty as an overarching theme based on the community's own articulated priorities.

Thematic coding was used to analyze all collected data, with themes identified through active listening in conversations on how participants described their experiences and practices. The coding process involved readings of transcribed materials, with themes emerging through analysis that remained attentive to participants' language and conceptual frameworks.

This analytical approach was fundamentally shaped by Indigenous research methodologies (Smith, 2012), which were integrated throughout the research process rather than applied as separate techniques. The sustained relationship-building that began in 2018 established the foundation for reciprocal research relationships, moving beyond extractive data collection toward collaborative knowledge creation. This long-term engagement allowed for a holistic understanding that recognized spiritual, cultural, and social dimensions of environmental sovereignty alongside more conventional resource management practices.

Community control over the research process manifested through ongoing consultation about research directions and preliminary findings. Participants contributed to the identification and interpretation of themes, ensuring that analysis remained grounded in community understandings

rather than external academic frameworks. The integration of oral traditions and storytelling proved particularly important when exploring spiritual dimensions of sovereignty, as participants often conveyed complex relationships with land through narrative forms that required careful attention to cultural protocols.

Land-based learning occurred throughout the research process, with both formal interviews and community participation taking place on traditional territory. This approach recognized that sovereignty practices are inherently place-based and cannot be fully understood through conventional academic settings alone.

All interviews and community interactions followed ethical review processes approved by the University of Manitoba, ensuring adherence to both institutional and community protocols. Beyond formal ethical requirements, the research was guided by principles of respect, reciprocity, and responsibility that characterize Indigenous research approaches (Smith, 2012).

Validity and Limitations

The nature of this research makes use of data from Cree lived experiences, knowledge as well as a Canadian written document review. The validity of the data was supported by both knowledge systems represented. These interviews were viewed through a decolonial lens, highlighting individual interviewees and their lived experiences. This study could not capture the experiences of all affected community members; however, it highlighted the experiences that were shared in a way that honours the sharing. Given the cultural and economic reliance on the land, it is acknowledged that legislation, economic factors, political climate, and environmental changes influenced these testimonies (Creswell, 2009). With the understanding that similar events are experienced differently, this approach seeks to acknowledge the uniqueness of individual experiences while highlighting the use of sovereignty and dynamism in community decision-making.

This methodology acknowledges several important limitations. The focus on formal interviews with Stewardship Centre personnel, while providing deep expertise, represents a specific perspective within the broader community. Future research could benefit from expanded community engagement across different age groups and roles. Additionally, the integration of

grounded theory with predetermined sovereignty themes required careful attention to ensure that analysis remained open to unexpected findings while maintaining focus on community-identified priorities.

Researcher positionality significantly influenced this study's framing and implementation. As detailed in the positionality statement at the beginning of this thesis, my role as a non-Indigenous researcher required ongoing reflection about power dynamics and knowledge production processes. The sustained community relationship beginning in 2018 helped establish trust and understanding that informed more ethical and effective research practices.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

Introduction

This thesis chapter looks to explore the issues surrounding hydro development. As the topics within this paper require contextual understanding, that is where this chapter begins. It continues to cover the development of hydro infrastructure, the impacts of this infrastructure, as well as their socioeconomic implications. This chapter goes further to discuss the responses to these impacts as actions of resilience and, further, as actions of sovereignty and its numerous aspects, such as community sovereignty, research sovereignty, data sovereignty, and spiritual sovereignty. This chapter draws from sources of information from Northern Manitoba, the larger Canadian context, as well as some global examples, to show that Indigenous communities internationally are facing similar experiences regarding resource development. As is conventionally required, this chapter consists solely of written literature. It is important to note that there exists a plethora of oral knowledge of the topics being discussed within Cree understandings.

3.1 Historical Context of Hydro Agreements

Pre-colonial or historical economies were vastly different from what is presented today, described as "a confederation of a number of local economies held together by a transport system" (Tough, 1996). Tough further described these economies as labour-based before the influence of European settlers and their economies (Tough, 1996). As European settlers arrived, they created new transportation corridors, expanding access to lands they had not yet explored. These areas were the economic and cultural hubs for the peoples living on the land. The increase of these transportation corridors marked the change of economic structures to a new cash and resource-based economy (Tough, 1996). In the shadow of existing treaties, Indigenous Peoples and the state were now forced to begin land rights discussions. Should Nations maintain their inherent rights to the land? Under what conditions would they be relinquishing their rights to the land? The basis of all these questions is whether Indigenous Peoples of Canada have inherent rights to their land.

The Indian Act of 1876 organized colonial control over Indigenous peoples and their lands. This Act established a legal structure that denied Indigenous sovereignty while creating mechanisms

for land dispossession (Lawrence, 2004). This legislation undermined Indigenous governance systems and land tenure arrangements, replacing them with colonial structures of administration enforced by institutions like the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). The Act's provisions regarding reserve lands, band membership, and resource extraction created the legal foundation on which future treaty negotiations and resource development projects would operate. This Act consistently prioritized colonial interests over Indigenous rights and sovereignty and continues to do so.

As stated, the goal of the Indian Act is the complete control of all factors of the Indigenous person (Lawrence, 2024). Their role in society, their economic prospects, and their political affiliations. There was a transfer in ownership of their lands, their resources, and their futures. There was even control of their Indigeneity through the 'Status Indian', a degeneration of a people into a series of numbers.

> *"The great aim of our legislation has been to do away with the tribal system and assimilate the Indian people in all respects with the other inhabitants of the Dominion as speedily as they are fit to change." John A. Macdonald, speech on Indigenous policy in Canada, 1887.*

In the context of these colonial structures, Indigenous Peoples were forced into land rights discussions with the state of Canada. A biased discussion with fundamentally unequal power dynamics. Various questions emerged from these discussions: Do Indigenous Peoples of Canada have inherent rights to their land? Under what conditions would they be relinquishing their rights? How could Indigenous sovereignty be maintained within colonial legal frameworks? These questions continue to animate contemporary discussions and negotiations concerning resource extraction, environmental assessment, and Indigenous consultation.

Later, additional treaties specifically related to resource extraction were introduced. For clarity, I will be referring to agreements made with resource extraction companies, the government, and Indigenous communities as modern treaties.

Signed in 1906, the James Bay Treaty was a social contract between the Canadian Crown and Anishinaabe (Algonquin and Ojibwe) and Omushkegowuk Cree communities (Dupius, 2011). An attempt to reach a similar agreement was undertaken later by Nelson House Cree Nation,

Norway House Cree Nation, Cross Lake First Nation, Split Lake Cree Nation, and York Factory First Nation with the Northern Flood Agreement (Dupius, 2011). This more modern treaty-like counterpart further asserts the existence of inherent land ownership of Indigenous peoples, asserting that Indigenous Peoples can have title over land in Canada. Dupius cautions that these rights, however, include the ability to cede their land for reserves, financial compensation, or to be allowed to do cultural activities (Dupius, 2011).

This opened negotiations between relevant jurisdictional governments, Indigenous peoples, and Hydro companies (Martin & Hoffman, 2008). Negotiations bore agreements which bore colonial administrative structures and colonial implementation, such as the Indian Act, and its implementation by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). If Indigenous communities were to cede land, they were also to cease or ease claims of hydroelectric impacts.

An example of one such treaty is the Northern Flood Agreement. The Northern Flood Agreement was an attempt to apply Indigenous autonomy in the negotiation of resource extraction boundaries. This was a failed attempt, however, as years after its signing, the outcomes of the Northern Flood Agreement were scrutinised in a report. The goal of this investigation was to learn from the shortcomings found in the NFA and its surrounding procedures (Larcombe, 1995). This report outlined three important points.

1. Implementation and the funding for the Northern Flood Agreement were not accounted for in the negotiations.
2. No funding was allocated for monitoring meant that there were no baselines to compare future data with.
3. All claims were made through a litigation process that was expensive and tiresome to the community.

All three points show that the process was not effective or meaningful. In this case, a modern treaty was used as a Band-Aid to avoid confrontation with a larger legal and governmental structure. Here we see that the context of hydro development is key to the outcomes of negotiations. Some may argue that the agreements were all past mistakes rectified with sufficient compensation. However, there has been no end to the impacts. Hydroelectric development continues to impact the lives of many people and their environments. The waters continue to

flow unnaturally, carrying the lands with them. The next section will highlight the impact of hydro development post-flooding.

3.2 Impacts of Development

Both the Manitoba economy and the larger Canadian economy is heavily reliant on hydroelectric resources. Even with the concerns of hydro development being mentioned, the energy economy must continue (Hoffman, Bryne, Martinez, & Glover, 2002). The extraction of resources from these lands often results in Indigenous peoples losing access to traditional territories, the disruption of ancestral practices, and the degradation of ecosystems upon which their livelihoods and cultural traditions depend (Rynard, 2001). In Manitoba, local hydro-related infrastructure is vast, and its impacts are well beyond the hydroelectric dam's footprint, with 50,000 square miles of northern boreal rivers and forest being irreversibly altered (Manitoba Clean Environment Commission, 2018). While the Burntwood River has been impacted by the Churchill River Diversion, the Nelson River has been impacted by the Lake Winnipeg Regulation (Manitoba Clean Environment Commission, 2018).

To the water, impacts include unnatural river systems exemplified by augmented water levels, augmented water flow patterns, temporary and permanent water contamination, frequent and larger cyanobacteria blooms (Thompson, 2015; Manitoba Clean Environment Commission, 2018). To the land, impacts include permanent flooding (Thompson, 2015), submersion of islands, erosion of lake shores and river banks, causing shifting shorelines and submersion of islands (Neckoway, 2018; Manitoba Clean Environment Commission, 2018). To the wildlife in these areas, impacts include the reduced health and abundance of grazing wildlife, declining fish populations, increased mercury levels in fish, and habitat fragmentation for migratory fish populations (Manitoba Clean Environment Commission, 2018).

3.2.1 Disproportional Impact

Environmental justice is a movement seeking to ensure fair and meaningful inclusion of affected peoples and equal sharing of benefits and costs when making decisions about the environment

(Government of Canada, 2024). It is of note that the environmental justice definition alone does not include room for discourse on Indigenous self-government or sovereignty.

For Indigenous people, there is an interdependence between Indigenous justice and economic justice; this interdependence of the social and environmental explains why Indigenous activists have been at the forefront of environmental justice movements seeking to end irresponsible resource extraction (Liu et al., 2025). One such overlap is seen in environmental racism. This occurs when environmental decision-making, policies, practices, and resulting economics overly disadvantage some people due to their race, with outcomes being intentional or unintentional (Government of Canada, 2024; Panayotou, 1997).

In Manitoba, the disproportional impacts related to hydro development on community members include health, initial displacement, continuous displacement, recurring displacement, long-term boiled water advisories due to water contamination, reduced access to lands and water for cultural and economic purposes (Thompson, 2015; Manitoba Clean Environment Commission, 2018; Graham, 2021).

3.2.2 Social Impact

The psychological impacts of hydroelectric development in northern Manitoba on Indigenous communities are an understudied area of research. This intersection features colonial trauma, environmental dispossession, and mental health outcomes. Mental health impacts on Indigenous communities have been shown to be a byproduct of resource development (Stefanon et al., 2023). Hydroelectric development in Manitoba aligns with these broader patterns.

The psychological consequences begin with the fundamental disruption of land-based relationships, a central part of Indigenous identity and wellbeing. Research has directly linked grief, sadness, and depression to the initial loss of access to traditional lands (Stefanon et al., 2023). There are resulting restrictions on land-based activities such as hunting, fishing, and ceremonies that were important for identity, Indigenous knowledge, and cultural practices. In northern Manitoba, these impacts are amplified by the scale and long-term nature of hydroelectric development. Hydro development has significantly altered the social, cultural, and environmental landscape since the 1960s. Housing shortages, high unemployment, trauma

associated with youth suicide, and drug crises are some current realities contributing to impacts on well-being. Additionally, long-term boil water advisories and their effects on daily living continue to have negative effects on psychological well-being. External contributions to this decline include racial discrimination at project sites, along with the destruction of land that was used for cultural practices. Significant gaps remain, as mental health research related to Indigenous peoples in Canada has historically overemphasized suicide and substance use while downplaying the contributions of colonialism and historical trauma (Ninomiya et al., 2023).

Another unaccounted cost of hydro development is the degradation of recreational and family spaces. These are historical sites for intergenerational, community, and family bonding. Sites would include beaches where families would meet for recreational activities such as learning how to swim, swimming, and visiting with other family/ community members. Islands where single or multiple families would have seasonal and long-term camps. Trapping lines and hunting grounds where intergenerational teaching and learning would occur, these would also be sites where community members would work together to hunt and prepare meat for the winter months. Lack of community leads to a lack of identity and sense of place (Manitoba Clean Environment Commission, 2018). These social disruptions lead to unemployment, abuse of drugs and alcohol by youth, suicide, and subsequent declining impacts on community life.

Hydroelectric development has created cascading social impacts that extend far beyond initial displacement.

3.2.3 Economic Impact

Manitoba Hydro operates six major dams in northern Manitoba. Five dams on the Nelson River and one in Grand Rapids on the Saskatchewan River. (Interfaith Council on Hydropower, 2025). Due to the density of dams in the region, Northern Manitoba experiences disproportional impacts as sites of hydroelectric development when compared to Southern Manitoba, which is where the power is used. Here, the placement of hydroelectric infrastructure and the impacts of these infrastructures are disproportional to groups in social risk positions. Hydro development is an environmental justice issue (Hoffman, Bryne, Martinez, & Glover, 2002).

Underlying the promise for green energy is the false notion that building, using, and expanding hydroelectricity is a step into the future, that is, a step into modernity (Hoffman, Bryne, Martinez, & Glover, 2002). Despite hydro electricity being a public utility, the ecological harms, enormous tax funding required (Keele, 2024), outrageous debt incurred (Yakabuski, 2023) and social issues associated (Wilt, 2019) are considered better for the greater good, and an acceptable cost to facilitate a 'modern life' (Hoffman, Bryne, Martinez, & Glover, 2002; Manitoba Clean Environment Commission, 2018).

One of the economic costs is the decline of a thriving fishery in OPCN, also known as South Indian Lake (Manitoba Clean Environment Commission, 2018) which at its peak was the third largest in North America. On the heels of the demise of local historic economies was the lack of fulfillment of the promised economies by Manitoba Hydro (Manitoba Clean Environment Commission, 2018). Manitoba Hydro promised improved economies and employment (Manitoba Clean Environment Commission, 2018). Where Manitoba Hydro promised employment and improved economies, Manitoba Hydro delivered short-term and irregular employment (Manitoba Clean Environment Commission, 2018). As mentioned by Manitoba Hydro (2013) in the Regional Cumulative Effects Assessment, the current shoreline clearance programs provide only a few weeks of work involving short-term contracts for brush clearing to maintain rights-of-way. This highlights the shortcomings of a promised economy.

3.3 Responses to Development

3.3.1 Resilience

More recently, the disproportionality of hydro impacts is evoking discussions on the role of Indigenous sovereignty in impact assessments as a whole and in influencing practices and approaches for standard impact assessment practices. Responses to these discussions have been the integration of Indigenous knowledge into impact assessments. This integration shows a resilience beyond current impacts to have upcoming projects done in a way that respects Indigenous knowledge and culture. Projects that have implemented this approach are the Two-Track Assessment for the Keeyask Project (Craft, 2022) and Harmonized Impact Assessment (Narratives Inc., 2024).

An example of this integration of knowledge is the two-track approach used in the environmental assessment of the Keeyask Hydroelectric Generation Project. In this process, the Indigenous community organization (Keeyask Cree Nations) and the proposed industry corporation (Partnership Regulatory Environmental Assessment) carried out two separate environmental evaluations, including each having its own environmental assessment process, consulting with the affected community, and forming their own expert groups of elders, resource users, and others (Craft & Blakely, 2022). The Keeyask Cree Nations' evaluation process made use of the Askiy Cree Worldview, and the Partnership Regulatory Environmental Assessment Process evaluation was based on the Response to the Environmental Impact Statement guidelines, a standard valued environmental component (VEC) approach. After both assessments were completed, the processes merged both tracks. Information and concerns from both assessments were weighed equally and applied equally throughout the project planning, mitigation, management, and monitoring phases.

Another example of this integration is the Harmonized Impact Assessment. In this approach, the Manito Aki Inaakonigaawin (the Great Earth Law) of the Anishinaabe Treaty Three Nations is integrated alongside other Anishinaabe teachings and Western science in the planning, negotiation, implementation, and monitoring phases of the Highway expansion from Winnipeg to Kenora. Principles of Manito Aki Inaakonigaawin, including Reciprocity and relationship, holistic interconnectedness, collective responsibility, and consensus. These approaches to impact assessments prove that it is possible to carry out multi-faceted impact assessments while maintaining Impact Assessment principles from the International Association for Impact Assessment (Narratives Inc., 2024).

The consideration and use of processes such as these indicates the potential for conceptual and practical growth of impact assessment practices of upcoming projects on Indigenous Lands. Both responses show that communities have not given up and seek to continue working with Manitoba Hydro in ways that are respectful of Indigenous knowledge and values.

3.3.2 Beyond Resilience: Sovereignty

Sovereignty in the context of Tataskweyak Cree Nation in Northern Manitoba is defined as the possibility to live free. "Why can't we just be" is a sentiment from Jonathon Kitchekeesik outlining the need for autonomy for decisions surrounding everyday living.

To successfully negotiate contemporary agreements, Indigenous autonomy must be genuinely recognized and respected rather than merely acknowledged in principle. This requires moving beyond consultation toward meaningful consent and shared decision-making authority. It also demands recognition that Indigenous governance systems and legal orders continue to operate alongside and sometimes in tension with colonial legal frameworks.

3.3.3 Community Sovereignty

In order to have an effective discourse, we must first provide a context, highlighting challenges that systematically prevent Indigenous communities from practicing community sovereignty. For Canada, this context is politics. Over the years, several legislative rulings have prompted federal and provincial governments of their duty to Indigenous peoples and the need for consultation regarding resource extraction activities.

In 2007, the United Nations General Assembly officially adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Canada voted against its adoption in 2007 but later 2010, endorsed UNDRIP, committing to align Canadian laws and policies with UNDRIP's principles (Fontaine, 2016). Essentially, UNDRIP affirms Indigenous peoples' rights to self-determination, cultural preservation, land, language, and participation in decision-making that affects them. Along with six other premiers across Canada, Brian Pallister, the Prime Minister at the time, expressed that supporting the federal UNDRIP legislation (Bill C-15) would interfere with provincial jurisdiction (CBC News, 2024). To date, only the province of British Columbia has enacted UNDRIP into its provincial legislation.

In 2019, the Canadian government passed and put the Impact Assessment Act into force (Department of Justice Canada, 2025). This act created a new federal process for assessing the environmental, health, social, and economic impacts of major resource projects. This act was to go beyond standard environmental effects, meaningfully include Indigenous people in earlier

planning stages, as well as mandate that decisions be based on both Western Scientific and Indigenous knowledge. Essentially, this act was focused on reconciliation in line with both UNDRIP and Section 35 of the Constitution. Similar to UNDRIP, sections of this act were considered as overstepping provincial jurisdiction and the same was confirmed by a Supreme Court ruling in (Osler, Hoskin & Harcourt LLP, 2023).

Historically and even in the contemporary context, the change of governments comes with changes in approaches towards projects affecting Indigenous individuals. The solution for this sinusoidal effect is self-determination. Indigenous people are best placed to make decisions regarding their land (Kennedy et al., 2023). This positioning for self-determination is founded on having the most stakes in the land outcomes from resource extraction. True self-governance requires that Indigenous peoples themselves determine the scope and nature of their autonomy. The Land Back movement represents an assertion of sovereignty (Hall, 2024). This movement has goals extending beyond land acknowledgment and into actual return of territorial control, resource management authority, and jurisdictional powers that enable meaningful self-governance.

The concept of legal personhood for natural entities provides another display of sovereignty, particularly cultural sovereignty (Coulthard, 2014). Indigenous cultures emphasize that stewardship is an essential part of Indigenous communities and their laws. The protection of sacred rivers, mountains, and territories through legal recognition aligns with Indigenous worldviews on kinship. The basis of environmental stewardship is accountability. Rather than view Indigenous people as stewards of the land, standard environmental assessment frameworks from resource extraction firms view Indigenous peoples as impediments and have the potential to disregard the same people and downplay environmental harm (Liu et al., 2025). Aboriginal rights are generally subordinate to other public policy priorities, and as a result, distinct cultures are threatened (Rynard, 2002). As a response to these realities, Indigenous people have sought to carry out research on their own terms (Coulthard, 2014).

3.3.4 Research Sovereignty

Western Science research methods are currently predominant in environmental research and are thus determined to be standard. Western Science research practices typically involve external researchers extracting knowledge from Indigenous communities through brief visits, interviews, and data collection activities that provide limited benefits to participant communities. These standard practices related to research and data are often not consistent with Indigenous cultures and collective rights (Carroll et al., 2020). These extractive approaches reflect broader colonial relationships that treat Indigenous territories and knowledge as resources to be harvested for external benefit.

While Western scientific methods focus on empirical results, Indigenous worldviews typically center ‘people’ and ‘purpose’, especially through governance processes that emphasize collective ownership and control of data (Carroll, Rodriguez-Lonebear & Martinez 2019; Kukutai & Taylor 2016b; Smith 2012; Snipp 2016). The history, identity, and concerns of Indigenous Peoples must be more centrally represented within corporate reporting practices (United Nations Environment Programme, 2020). To be authoritative in research and data production, i.e., to produce research that is consistent with Indigenous worldviews, Indigenous Peoples have been taking steps to first authenticate Indigenous forms of knowledge and to fortify their rights to govern research and resulting data (Garrison et al. 2019; Kukutai & Taylor 2016b; Smith 2012).

Indigenous research methodologies challenge colonial research practices that have historically extracted knowledge from Indigenous communities. Wilson's "Research is Ceremony" framework emphasizes relational accountability, recognizing that research relationships extend beyond individual projects to encompass ongoing responsibilities between researchers and communities (Wilson, 2008). Here, Indigenous data sovereignty recognizes Indigenous peoples' rights to control data about their communities, territories, and cultural practices.

Defining research sovereignty, here the community is in control of how research is carried out and interpreted in its lands. The observed community priorities are self-determination, cultural preservation, and holistic wellbeing that encompasses spiritual, social, and environmental dimensions rather than narrow economic metrics. Looking at impacts from an Eco-centrism lens can be risky. While seemingly innocuous, it can be harmful in privileging non-human aspects of the environment over Indigenous peoples' rights. Notions and presence on traditional territories,

perpetuating colonial narratives of "wilderness", often exclude Indigenous communities from their own lands.

Extraction research methods mirror the extractive culture in the industries they study, taking knowledge from communities without reciprocal benefit, ownership, or control. In some cases, they treat Indigenous knowledge as raw material for academic production. In other cases, predatory consultants in the environmental field exploit community concerns about development impacts while offering superficial engagement that legitimizes predetermined outcomes rather than genuine community input.

True collaboration with communities requires shared power in research design, implementation, and dissemination, moving beyond consultation toward partnership where communities retain intellectual property rights and decision-making authority. Research collaboration must involve community members as co-researchers who shape methodologies and interpret findings through Indigenous frameworks (Bradbury & Fetterman, 2015).

The right of refusal represents fundamental sovereignty, acknowledging that communities can reject research or development proposals that conflict with their values or interests. Meaningful engagement occurs when research addresses community-identified priorities and contributes to community-defined goals, operating at a community-determined pace that respects Indigenous protocols and decision-making processes rather than external timelines driven by academic or industry schedules.

3.3.5 Data Sovereignty

Indigenous communities increasingly assert authority over environmental data collected on their territories, challenging colonial research and monitoring practices that extract information without providing benefits to Indigenous communities. Data ownership includes authority over how information is collected, analyzed, stored, and shared, as well as ownership of research outcomes and recommendations (The First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2024).

Environmental monitoring programs conducted by government and industry often collect extensive data on Indigenous territories without involving Indigenous communities in program design, data analysis, or decision-making processes. This extractive research method treats

Indigenous territories as research sites while excluding Indigenous knowledge and governance authority from environmental management decisions.

Community-based monitoring programs focus on research methods, providing alternatives to colonial data collection by involving Indigenous communities in designing monitoring programs, collecting data, and analyzing results according to Indigenous knowledge systems and priorities. These programs assert Indigenous authority over environmental information while building community capacity for environmental governance.

While the above examples address research methods reflecting Indigenous priorities, CARE and FAIR principles were developed to further challenge data production methods regarding Indigenous Peoples' interests and governance needs. (Carroll et al., 2020). CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance (Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, and Ethics) were collectively developed to complement the existing data-focused approach represented in the 'FAIR Guiding Principles for scientific data management and stewardship' (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable) (Carroll et al., 2021). This shift in data approaches within the context of Indigenous cultures promotes equitable participation resulting in equitable outcomes (Carroll et al., 2020). Where these principles are applied, researchers will have built respectful relationships with communities and can practice data governance in the use of data for policy decision-making and service evaluation. The result of proper use of these principles is that data produced reflects community values (Carroll et al., 2021).

Building upon FAIR and CARE principles, the First Nations Information Governance Centre's OCAP principles (Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession) is a framework for Indigenous data sovereignty that affirms First Nations' rights to govern their own data and information. This approach goes beyond research methods and data production into the possession and control of data, controlling the outcomes of research. For this purpose, OCAP is a tool of self-determination and cultural preservation. These principles assert Indigenous authority over Indigenous-focused information while establishing protocols for ethical research relationships and practice. They have been adopted by Indigenous communities and organizations across Canada.

Chapter 4: Where we are now

Introduction

This chapter examines the intersections of social, cultural, and environmental dynamics experienced by members of O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation ᐅᐱᐴᓇᐱᐏᐣ and Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑵᔭᕽ in hydroelectric development. Particularly exploring intersections of land relationships and cultural practices, drawing discussions with personal and community identity. It investigates environmental impacts from imbalanced power dynamics as an underlying source of grief.

This chapter draws from qualitative research interviews and comprehensive archival research from the Clean Environment Commission Hearings for Keeyask and the Regional Cumulative Effects Assessment. The research methodology made use of community-based participatory research methods, prioritizing Indigenous knowledge systems and lived experiences. Centering Indigenous voices and perspectives provides a needed nuance in understanding the gravity of changes occurring within both communities, particularly in relation to environmental change, cultural continuity, and systemic disruptions from assertions of sovereignty. It hopes to meet objective one as outlined in the introductory chapter, specifically giving a people-first context to hydro-related development.

For Cree culture, relationships are a fundamental basis of interactions with other people, lands, water, and the rest of creation (Bird, 2007). It is of note that kinship is not only between human persons, or with the plants and animals that sustain human life, but also with the inanimate aspects of the environment and their interactions with them. Practicing these relationships with aspects of the land through land-based activities represents a significant and critical portion of Cree identity. This chapter begins with defining this kinship identity in theory and practice. It continues to highlight ways in which land-based activities contribute to cultural continuity. It then introduces a new or alien concept of kinship in imbalanced power relations that opposes prior understandings of kinship. Lastly, the impacts of this alien kinship on the land and people.

Figure 1: Word Cloud showing data of themes by frequency of appearance.

Compiled by Bobbie Mangeli.

Table of themes – Chapter 4

Theme	Subtheme
4.1 Cultural land-based practices	4.1.1 Identity 4.1.2 Fishing 4.1.3 Trapping
4.2 Cultural Continuity	4.2.1 Intergenerational Learning 4.2.2 Community Sharing and Reciprocity
4.3 An alien kinship	4.3.1 Imbalanced Negotiations 4.3.2 Promises, Partnership, and Agreements

4.4 Current Realities	4.4.1 Environmental impacts 4.4.2 Displacement - physical, knowledge, spiritual, economic

4.1 Cultural Land-Based Practices

4.1.1 Identity

Analysis of participant interviews revealed several key themes of relationships between land, identity, and community among Northern Manitoba Cree. Participants consistently described identity as being formed through interactions with the land, with traditional activities serving as foundational to both personal and community identity.

O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation was introduced earlier as a community with a thriving fishing economy; as such, everyday actions revolved around the fish plant activity. This location by the lake was the kinship or meeting point for fishing people, land fish, and water. This was the place fishermen would dock their boats, bringing in commercial catch for weighing and grading. It is also where they would collect the cheques for previous catches. This place was central to the community identity.

> *"I don't think there's too much life in this plant. And yet, it was the fish that made this community years and years and years ago." Calvin Baker, Fish Plant Manager, O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation* ᐅᐱᐴᓇᐱᐃᐧᐣ

Where nearly the entire community was involved in commercial fishing, the following statement illustrates the historical significance of fishing activities in community formation and identity. Similarly, the centrality of hunting to community identity emerged as another theme. These descriptions of identity are crucial as they are both spoken about and woven into daily practice through land-based activities. This suggests an inseparable nature of activities from the people practicing the same. The following quote also shows the communal identity formed through the collective practice of land-based activities. This quote introduces the concept that identity is formed not only by collective assignment and practice but also by individual practices of land-based activities. The balance of both origins of identity is perfectly encapsulated.

"This community is a hunting community. Everybody goes hunting." Calvin Baker, Fish Plant Manager, O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation ᐅᐱᐹᓇᐱᐃᐧᐣ

This introduction of individual practice as a source of collective identity is further shown where participants frequently described the connections between livelihood, place, and personal identity. Key markers of community identities were reflected in descriptions of personal identities. A spatial aspect of identity is introduced where both community and individual identity formation occur on the land with engagement with traditional land-based economies. Reflecting the choices surrounding spatial identity, one participant said the following.

"I based my life on this industry, that's where I grew up. That's where I based my family," Calvin Baker, Fish Plant Manager, O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation ᐅᐱᐹᓇᐱᐃᐧᐣ

With the establishment of individual and collective identity as being practiced spatially, the data indicated that disruptions to land access and traditional activities directly impact identity and well-being. Essentially, disruptions to the land are reflected as disruptions to identity. This connection was evident in expressions of grief and disillusion, reflecting the psychological impact of hydro development, specifically the broad environmental changes in the lands and waters, and the ensuing interruption of traditional practices. To that effect, one participant said the following.

"I feel - I felt like I wasted 30 years of my life just to see nothing." Calvin Baker, Fish Plant Manager, O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation ᐅᐱᐹᓇᐱᐃᐧᐣ

In this example of grief, there is a loss of identity from the inability to carry out land-based practices. During the interviews, language was described as the intersection of land and land-based activities. One participant referred to the naming practices as an indicator of what activities were originally performed in that space, and how place names reflect Indigenous Knowledge. This intersection is made evident in a particular example where the extent of hydro-development impacts of Manitoba Hydro was being challenged by Manitoba Hydro.

"I had an argument with Hydro for a long time that they said that there was no sturgeon in South Indian [lake], so I asked them, Okay, what is my fish plant up North called? And

they looked at me, Sturgeon Narrows. Go figure." Calvin Baker, Fish Plant Manager, O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation ᐅᐱᐹᓇᐱᐎᐣ

Here, Calvin Baker was emphasizing that this place was so abundant with sturgeon that this section of the lake was named Sturgeon Narrows. It also shows that the sturgeon are so removed from this space that the Manitoba Hydro representative is doubting their very existence in this space. The exchange demonstrates an ongoing conflict between spatial Indigenous knowledge systems and external authorities.

These findings on identity suggest that land-based activities are crucial to community and individual notions of Cree identities in both O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation and Tataskweyak Cree Nation. Further, disruptions to relationships between the people and the land have significant impacts on both individual and community well-being.

4.1.2 Fishing

One longstanding land practice is fishing. Western paradigms of fishing typically strictly categorize this activity into either commercial or subsistence. Contrarily, participants view fishing as an expression of cultural identity, a platform for intergenerational knowledge transfer, a spiritual connection to the land and water, a subsistence activity, and lastly, as a commercial pursuit (Spring et al., 2025). This section illustrates the changes to the fishing landscape by providing historical context.

All participants in O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation described fishing as once being an important activity that a majority of community members were involved in before hydro development impacted the rivers, lakes, and other smaller connected water bodies. The following statement highlights the historical importance of fishing to the community and the individual.

> *"There are a few that still carry on, you know, with fishing, but not as many as before. Before, it was almost a total population of men that did the fishing." Christine Spence, O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation ᐅᐱᐹᓇᐱᐎᐣ*

The statement also shows changes in these activities over time, highlighting the present realities of a declined fishing community. The decline being significant as it suggests not only a shift in

subsistence and commercial activity, but the change of the community's physical landscape, i.e., changes in water bodies, and social landscape - changes in social roles of former fishermen. The upstream community, TCN, similarly experienced a stark change away from a vibrant fishing community, described by James Disbrowe in the following statement.

> *"Everybody used to be fishing all over the lake. This whole lake used to be good commercial fishing, [no need] to worry about welfare. Now, not even a boat - not even a boat. It's like a ghost lake. You know, you [used to] see boats all over the place, this whole area. Now I travel. I travel every day up north. It's like a ghost lake and not even a ripple, not even a boat driving by. And we used - long time ago, just to see like a town, like boats all over the place. The whole family, the whole family lived on fishing." James Disbrowe, Tataskweyak Cree Nation* ᑕᑕᐢᑿᔦᕽ

This statement captures the ways that fishing was once an activity that involved multiple family units throughout the communities. Along with the changes to the social landscape are the changes to the economic landscape. Economic aspects of this decline also emerged as a significant theme in participant narratives. This theme was frequently identified as the basis of the individual and community decline. Most participants went further to associate this change with the current socio-economic landscape, such as resultant unemployment. James Disbrowe contrasted the past abundance with the current scarcity in the following statement.

> *"There should be a town, like a town there [at] that big fish plant, like 300, 600 tubs of two boys [semi-trucks] going back and forth, hauling fish. Boat [used] to bring them in 600 every second day. Now there's no- no fisherman." James Disbrowe, Tataskweyak Cree Nation* ᑕᑕᐢᑿᔦᕽ

This steep reduction in fishing activity is further substantiated by employment statistics at the last standing community fish plant. Calvin Baker has worked as the Fish Plant Manager at O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation for over a decade. He provided information about this swift decline in a statement that quantifies the reduction in commercial fishing activity. The statement indicates the financial impacts on community members who have had to find other available employment within the community. As we looked at the mailboxes at the fish plant during our visit in Fall 2022, there was a realization that almost all of them were empty and dusty.

"There are now only 10 fishermen when there used to be 120 fishermen in this community. No one relies on fishing anymore. The fishermen are now working for hydro to remove the debris, which doesn't pay as much as they used to make fishing." Calvin Baker, O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation ᐅᐱᐴᓇᐱᐃᐧᐣ

The empty mailboxes are a physical marker of the changes that have occurred in the community economy. As seen with the empty mailboxes, the large capacity of the infrastructure within the fishing plant also stands as tangible evidence of the changes that have taken place. Where there was once abundant activity and a need for hundreds of tubs and an entire new wing at the fish plant, now there are largely underutilized facilities.

"There used to be tubs and tubs of fish that the community had to build a northern unit for the fish processing plant. All that remains in that unit are three empty tubs. The unit has closed since there is no fish to process," Calvin Baker, O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation ᐅᐱᐴᓇᐱᐃᐧᐣ

These changes in physical uses of space and resources are reflective of significant community investments that are no longer in use. Similar to the earlier description of the lake as a ghost lake, the lack of fishing here is also equated with a lack of life. This suggests that fishing is both a physical and spiritual activity. It implies an association between forms of life in the undertaking of an activity and the use of the associated structures and their use. Calvin Baker explains the interconnectedness between fishing, identity, and economic shifts.

"I don't think there's too much life in this [fishing] plant. And yet, it was the fish that made this community years and years and years ago. I got a million-dollar setup up north, and it's just sitting there rotting, just rotting, no fish." Calvin Baker, Fish Plant Manager, O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation ᐅᐱᐴᓇᐱᐃᐧᐣ

He correlates the changes in the surrounding lakes to the reduced use of these facilities, highlighting a domino effect of degradation. He further illustrates how these changes are reflected in the change of fish quality and quantity, reducing the financial viability and hence the incentive to fish.

> *"We used to have export-grade fish; now we have headless fish, the lowest quality fish. The quality of the fish being caught has reduced tremendously; in the same way, the income being derived from the fish has reduced. It is no longer viable for commercial fishers to continue solely as fishermen, so they went to find other jobs to supplement their income, or they left entirely." Calvin Baker, Fish Plant Manager, O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation* ᐅᐱᐹᓇᐱᐎᐣ

This quote shows the state of decline of fishing as a cultural and commercial pursuit in both communities. The context of historical fishing suggests that fishing is more than an economic activity in O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation and Tataskweyak Cree Nation. The steep decline in fishing activities has ultimately stripped people away from the waters, having implications on economic well-being, cultural identity, community roles, and spiritual well-being.

The same is seen as true for other land-based activities such as trapping. In addition to being a modern economic activity, trapping is seen as a pillar of historical interactions, cultural economic strategy, a critical marker for environmental changes, and a medium for maintaining cultural relationships with the land. During a community visit in March 2025 at the Pimoteyan Kimeskanaw Youth Camp held at Chief Sam Cook Mahmuwee Education Centre. Jonothan Kitchekeesik explained how they used to trade guns for furs when they were younger. Beaver pelts were so abundant that at one point in time, they were used to trade for hunting rifles. Jonothan Kitchekeesik, who is at least 6 feet tall, mentioned that traders from the Hudson's Bay Company would accept flatly laid beaver pelts around his height to barter for a hunting rifle.

These changes in land use, specifically fishing and trapping, occur not only to the land but are mirrored by a people whose lives and cultures depend on the land.

4.2 Cultural Continuity

The practice of land-based activities extends back into the community. Activities such as intergenerational learning and sharing of various harvests show the impact that land-based activities have on community members and on a way of life. Through this learning and sharing, a culture is continued.

4.2.1 Intergenerational learning

As seen, historical accounts of activities carried out in the land show that these activities on the land were year-round, with particular emphasis on the summer seasons. Here we see that activities on the land were carried out simultaneously across multiple generations within family groups. Going out on the land was an intergenerational activity.

> *“Now, long time ago, people used to, you know, take their whole family to camp, and that’s where they were for the majority of the summer into the fall here." Christine Spence, O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation* ᐅᐱᐴᓇᐱᐏᐣ

Here we see that these activities were carried out across seasons. The lifestyle of complete relocation during some seasons alludes to a nomadic lifestyle involving entire family units across age groups.

> *"Everybody lived on the lake in the summer, and they all helped each other." Participant 5, O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation* ᐅᐱᐴᓇᐱᐏᐣ

Understanding that families moved between different camps for months, the inability to practice this seasonal relocation is a devastating loss for youth to understand the critical relationships with the land. The land was and is a space where intergenerational interactions occur. These interactions foster the relationships of all involved persons with the land, thereby making the land a site for cultural adaptation and preservation. These relationships with the land are extended to other community and family members when participants go back into communities to share items they have gathered. Looking further into intergenerational learning, this research examined the flow, breaks, or lack of flow in cultural knowledge transmission across generations, especially in the context of recent and rapid environmental and social changes.

> *"And all the young men and the fathers, they took their sons, and they, they'd go out fishing, and they, you know, they just, you know, they made a lot of money, and they were able to survive without much need of finding other jobs. So that was the main income. Is fishing" Christine Spence, O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation* ᐅᐱᐴᓇᐱᐏᐣ

Participants consistently described that knowledge was shared out on the land as activities were carried out on the land. This knowledge sharing was oral and direct, passing information through observation and hands-on teaching of skills under the different scenarios on the land. This hands-on approach to cultural knowledge transmission was part of a larger cultural teaching method from past generations to current generations and to future generations. This intergenerational exchange is exemplified in the following description.

> *"See that the old man [referring to his father-in-law] taught me. He taught me this river, like he took me everywhere." James Disbrowe, Tataskweyak Cree Nation* ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔭᕽ

Here we see that the learning was based on the waterways he occupied, and the information learned included spatial ties. This information also included familial ties. This experiential learning extends to specific territories that would be visited and maintained through family lines.

Figure 2: Map of Registered Trap Lines in South Indian Lake

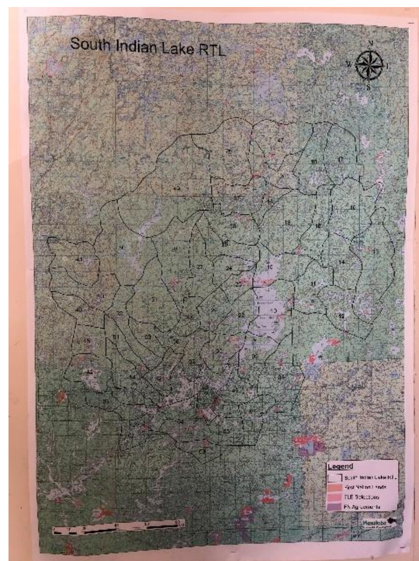


Photo taken by Bobbie Mangeli at South Indian Lake Conservation Office in October 2022.

For example, when teaching a son or daughter how to trap, you would need to learn how to make a trap, where to place a trap, and how to retrieve a trapped animal, all on the family trap line. The following quote explains the importance of these familial ties in the land-based activities, as well as sharing the information.

"As a matter of fact, trap lines are shared down through families. It's more or less based on a family, like they try to keep it generation - generation, once my son passes, they're going to take over that line." James Disbrowe, Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔭᕽ

Here we see that the trapline system was familial, ensuring youth had specific areas to learn from. This system was an assurance of continual knowledge transmission. Similarly, all activities and skills associated with fishing would be carried out experientially while fishing. Associated knowledge and skills transferred included river navigation, setting nets, and cultural preparation of the fish, among other fish-related activities throughout all the seasons. These activities were so important to the location that these areas were referred to as fish camps. Here, Randal explains the past activities of the fish camp, contrasting them with the current realities.

"Used to take all my kids to the fish camp. Your own kids would, you know, you don't take a whole bunch of kids because you can't afford it, but people still take their own kids out to show them" Randal Linklater, O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation ᐅᐱᐹᓇᐱᐃᐧᐣ

This breach in information occurs when the sites to practice knowledge sharing exchanges are inaccessible. Beyond the loss of skills and information is the loss of principles associated with land-based activities. The following is an example of such a quote that indicates a sustainability principle associated with hunting.

"I don't shoot the cow. I'll shoot a yearling bull. I won't shoot it if it's a female, because there's one now, if there's [one] next year, there'll be four. The next year, there will be maybe 10." James Disbrowe, Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔭᕽ

In addition to skills, knowledge, and principles, information that would impact daily life is also impacted. The following explains the practical use of a plant. This statement was shared as we spotted this plant from the boat while navigating the Burntwood River in October 2022. This was a passing interaction. Where there is cessation of land-based activities, spontaneous sharing of information like this indicates that deep knowledge transference does not occur.

"Witch's Hair is good because it's natural. It lights really well, they used to take it- mothers would when they were walking places. The mothers would take sphagnum moss

off the ground and hang it in trees so that it would dry. And then it was Pampers. It's an Indigenous term - things that wrap you back wrap babies in." James Disbrowe, Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔦᕽ

Scenarios such as these passed down knowledge through generations. Oral sharing of knowledge is cultural knowledge transfer. It surpasses the simple categorization as information about the environment and moves into deep, contextual knowledge that is the pillar of a way of being, not only for future generations but for aspects of daily life.

Figure 3: James Disbrowe setting a fire on the Burntwood and Odei River junction.

Photo taken by Gerald Beta at Burntwood and Odei River junction in October 2022.

4.2.2 Community sharing

Two Cree values that were repeatedly referred to indirectly were Okihtowihiwewin (generosity) and Mêkinawêwin (giving), the practice of culture through sharing. These are highly respected Cree values that portray the extent of community care and cohesion in harsh times and environments. In both Cree Nations, there was an expected continuous baseline of this cultural practice under normal circumstances, built upon to increase in frequency under strenuous economic circumstances. The following quote shows that this practice was integrated into the culture from earlier times.

> *"Everyone was taught, once you come back from hunting, you don't come and store everything in your freezer. You go out and share it with the elders, the people with large families. That's how you do it." Robert Spence, Tataskweyak Cree Nation* ᑕᑕᐢᑿᔦᕽ

This quote also exemplifies the priority of giving. The sharing of the harvest even before storing it shows that giving was a priority. Sharing and reciprocity practices both sustain the traditional economic model and helped alleviate hardship in exceptionally difficult economic times like COVID-19 and the age of Manitoba Hydro impacts.

> *"You shoot, what you kill, what you see, because you share it. Yeah, we shared with [the] rest of the people." Participant 6, O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation* ᐅᐱᐴᓇᐱᐏᐣ

Here we see that even while out on the land, community members are thinking about providing for other members. In the following quote, an elder shares the ways that this community-mindedness continued even during COVID-19.

> *"We would bring it back and we share it to others. It would all be distributed to the community during that time of hardship. But there's still people that will hunt, and they will come to the door, to the elders, and share." Christine Spence, O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation* ᐅᐱᐴᓇᐱᐏᐣ

Here we see that there is an intersection between two age groups on the axis of land-based activities and peripheral cultural practices of generosity and giving. The withdrawal of land-based activities via hydroelectric development land impacts, limits opportunities for interactions such as these.

4.3 A strange kinship

Kinship is based on equality and respect. Negotiations in Cree culture are usually made by two parties of equal standing. It is from this understanding of truly equal kinship that agreements with corporations were made. The outcomes of these agreements, however, prove that there is an imbalance, that this is a strange/alien form of relating.

4.3.1 Imbalanced negotiations

As mentioned, the negotiations between Manitoba Hydro and communities highlight significant power differences proven in imbalanced negotiations and outcomes. Community members confirm the same regarding past negotiations with the provincial government and Manitoba Hydro. Community members indicate that there were biases present that fixed the outcomes of negotiations.

> *"How do you negotiate things? Every negotiation proposed by the government gets 80% regardless [of] who, they [the other negotiation party] will get 20% of everything." Jonathon Kitchekeesik, Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔦᕽ*

This statement illustrates the biased nature of negotiations is proven in outcomes that frequently favour one party. Further, multiple participants signalled the discrepancies between verbal and written negotiation discussions. Suggesting that the written agreements presented later for signing did not include the same terms as the verbal agreements made during negotiation discussions. This practice has increased a mistrust of negotiation partners, precisely with Manitoba Hydro, due to their role in hydro-development in northern Manitoba. One community member provides one such example.

> *"All they [Manitoba Hydro] told me was, I'll make your lake bigger, so you'll get more fish, but exactly the opposite." Calvin Baker, O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation ᐅᐱᐴᓇᐱᐃᐧᐣ*

In this example, a representative from Manitoba Hydro verbally promised the community members that the project would expand the lake by flooding it and therefore have more fish within the water body. The representative posed that the expansion would benefit the individuals in the community. However, the resulting changes showed the opposite effect of having fewer fish. In a similar example, we can see the discrepancies between outcomes promised in verbal discussions and the realities of a very different project outcome.

> *"It's like presenting a pretty picture to you. I come to you with gifts, bearing gifts. This will be yours if you do exactly as I say, how I say it, and then in the end, you're sitting at the end of the table, expecting this pretty picture, right? But then I hand it over to you,*

> *and it's completely different. There you go. I flip it on you right before I give it to you, and it's not the picture that was good. There you go, and it's completely redone and rewritten, you know, and it's repainted." Robert Spence, Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔦᕽ*

This misrepresentation is a recurring theme within negotiation expectations and outcomes. In another example, participants described the unexpected cost of 10 million dollars for the hydroelectric development negotiation process and a building within the community.

> *"Remember the 12 million Dollars they were. They gave us 12 million, or something like that, and they approved it. And after they approved it, they took 10 million for what we owed." Jonathon Kitchekeesik, Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔦᕽ*

The building being referred to is the current stewardship building in the TCN community that was apparently promised as a gift of the partnership by Manitoba Hydro. Community members claim to have been presented with unexpected costs such as these over project negotiations.

> *"Our community had to pay back dollar for dollar everything that was spent for the negotiations at the time, from our community engaging with the corporation and the government to pay for our percentage of the negotiation costs. So, after the deal was done with Keeyask, then there's a piece of paper sitting in front of council saying you gotta pay this much back for the negotiation process. You pay for your end, this is your cost, because you're a partner." Robert Spence, Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔦᕽ*

In this example, Manitoba Hydro failed to communicate the expectations that TCN would pay for a portion of the negotiations. This firstly suggests a generalized approach that is not tailored to specific communities. The further assumption that this was a normal practice shows a different culture of negotiation interactions. Here, community members illustrate that notions of partnership are understood differently by various negotiation parties, verifying the underlying alien nature of kinship displayed by Manitoba Hydro and Government negotiators.

In addition to the generalized approaches for negotiations, ongoing consultation practices also imply that community negotiations are a box-checking activity. This generalised approach also

leads to pre-determined outcomes as it dilutes community input on upcoming projects, ultimately eroding the right of refusal for projects. Testimonies from community members reveal a pattern of proceeding with development regardless of local opposition; previous negotiations seem to have waived the right to refusal. This further illustrates the power imbalance in decision-making processes, where even when community objections are acknowledged, they are still finally disregarded.

> "They went right ahead. Nobody wanted it, but they said that they didn't, you had the community, and said that they didn't want it, but they continued." Participant 6, *O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation ᐅᐱᐹᓇᐱᐃᐧᐣ*

In exchange for the ultimate continuation of hydro development projects, industrial partners offer various compensation programs. Community members stated that these programs were inadequate compared to the sheer magnitude of the impacts. Numerous testimonies emphasize how mitigation programs have failed to provide substantive, reliable economic opportunities for community needs, instead offering only limited, seasonal employment and land access that cannot sustain livelihoods.

> *"How do you negotiate things? Every negotiation proposed by the government gets 80% regardless [of] who, they [the other negotiation party] will get 20% of everything." Jonathon Kitchekeesik, Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔭᕽ*

Even though the projects upend various aspects of livelihood, participants noted the use of these inadequate compensation programs to indemnify Manitoba Hydro and the provincial government from future losses. In addition, participants noted their concerns about how these agreements are being used to dismiss ongoing community concerns.

> "Well, if you talk to hydro, they say, look, here, you signed off on all this stuff you're asking for some so you're on your own." Participant 2, *O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation ᐅᐱᐹᓇᐱᐃᐧᐣ*

Direct environmental impacts of hydro development translate into personal financial impacts. Despite the unending nature of hydro impacts, various compensation programs introduced time

limits for their disbursement. Impacts that were covered at earlier stages have since been withdrawn, leaving the cost of compensation to community members.

> *"If you bust your motor [with a] hidden and floating log. They used to replace it. Now they don't." Randal Linklater, O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation* ᐅᐱᐹᓇᐱᐃᐧᐣ

This statement shows how formal negotiations and agreements have been used to pass on the cost of compensation to the impacted individuals, further reinforcing an imbalanced kinship.

4.4 Current impacts and realities

This section will demonstrate the realities of ongoing impacts that have not been fully addressed by previous negotiations or current compensation programs.

4.4.1 Environmental Impact

As presented earlier, O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation and Tataskweyak Cree Nation were communities with thriving commercial fishing. Today, the reality is starkly different. After the Churchill River Diversion in 1976 and following multiple hydroelectric dams surrounding the communities, the natural waters surrounding these communities have been turned into reservoirs. Both communities continue to face extreme and unnatural water fluctuations. These unnatural changes, along with seasonal, monthly, weekly, and diurnal, are influenced by climate change; the river is unable to sustain the quantity and quality of fish it previously boasted of.

> *"To catch fish before the flood, it was easy. There's no fish. They're gone, done." Randal Linklater, O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation* ᐅᐱᐹᓇᐱᐃᐧᐣ

The lakes and rivers are less habitable for spawning Sturgeon, a keystone species. These spawning grounds that previously offered shale as an ideal habitat are now occupied with silt from upstream hydroelectric dams. Participants also consistently reported negative ecological outcomes for other animal populations, highlighting the contrast between pre-flood and post-flood conditions.

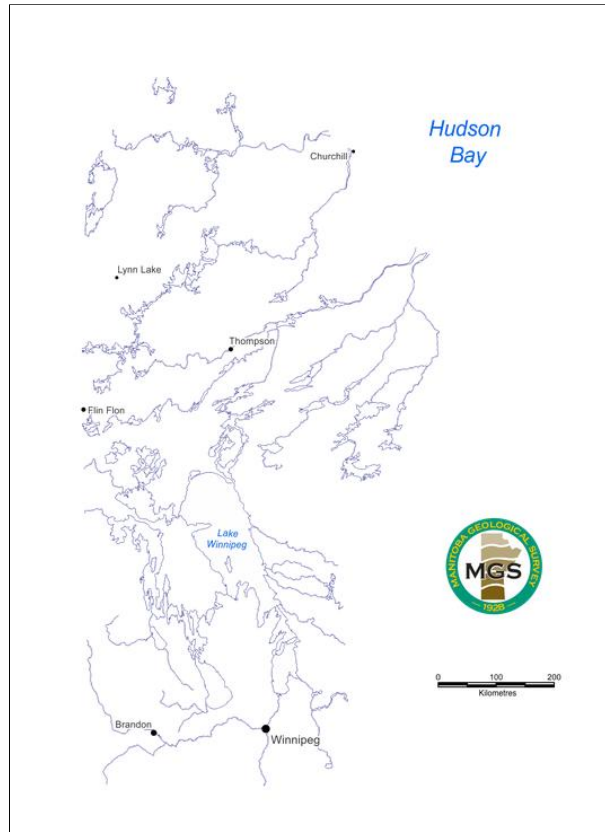
"They build their house right here, there'll be the same water [that] goes up and down. That's why they live on the side of the road. You see a lot of beavers go up on the side of the road, building their house on the ditch. I think that's only best place they can live. They can't live there no more. It's all flat washed away all of what, all of what's gone in, washed away. Everything floated up. They go up and down. See the beavers, don't have a clue what's going on. You know, even geese. They fly by over. They don't even land around here." Participant 10, O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation ᐅᐱᐴᓇᐱᐎᐣ

In this account, we see the cascading impact of flooding on various ecosystems. Alarmingly, the flooding has dramatically altered traditional navigation markers and geographic features. These were points that were relied on for safe navigation, making water bodies increasingly difficult and unsafe to navigate. One major change on the waterways has been the decimation of islands through erosion. The fluctuating water levels, along with increased speed of water regimes, have washed away multiple islands, requiring extreme caution even from participants who have navigated these waters their whole lives.

"See, I told you about that little island, that long island right here. Now it's just that little tree. Okay, you see that little buff right there? You see the reefs and the island used to come right here, right here. Yeah, halfway, just to that thing. It came this way. See right where that bluff is. It comes right there. It used to come right there. You used to have to walk up, to get on the Island. Now, it's gone." James Disbrowe, Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑿᔽᕽ

Before erosion, the islands referred to acted as traditional navigational markers for community members. It is important to note that northern Manitoba boasts of innumerable lakes and rivers. Hence, the majority of navigation for land-based activities must occur through the water's highway system. Impacts on these navigations extend into impacts on land use.

Figure 4: Map showing extensive Manitoba waterways.



Interactive Map of Manitoba Rivers and Lakes from the Manitoba Geological Survey website.

> *"Not too many people go on to do the trap line and go to fish camps and even hunting, because, like our lake now, is no longer safe to travel. There's a lot of currents all over and it's unsafe for travel. So, people like the trappers, the fishers, they don't travel as much because they don't know which areas are safe to travel on. And she says, it's a continuous thing. You don't know when it's going to be unsafe for traveling. So, they don't do that as much as they did in the olden days." Chief Shirley Ducharme translating on behalf of Christine Spence, O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation* ᐅᐱᐴᓇᐱᐎᐣ

While creating safety hazards for knowledgeable community members, this erosion makes the water systems unpredictable for youth trying to learn it's navigation. Flooding thus widens the intergenerational knowledge gap by decreasing the ability and ease of learning waterways.

> *"That's all flooded landing because the channel is right there. There was an island, an island that said that was our marker. When we come up at night, they used to be up. These new kids, yeah, they won't know they're going to run right into the reefs." James Disbrowe, Tataskweyak Cree Nation* ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔦᕽ

These findings suggest that the current impacts of flooding and erosion are not only environmental but also impact daily living, knowledge sharing, and community safety.

4.4.2 Displacement as physical, knowledge, spiritual, and economic

Another result of erosion is the physical displacement of family campsites. This directly affects interactions with the land throughout the seasons. Here, participants described these environmental changes as causing displacement, forcing the relocation or abandonment of camps.

> *"There used to be camps all over the place. Some of these camps washing up and rolling," reported Randal Linklater, O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation* ᐅᐱᐹᓇᐱᐃᐧᐣ

Family campsites were locations typically established camp sites along the shores of waterways. These were sites that families would return to year after year. Family campsites are facing ongoing displacement and require constant adaptation to erosion patterns and ultimately remain abandoned.

> *"They have a cabin over here that was their fishing cabin nets, but they gave up because of the water [erosion] and everything." James Disbrowe pointing to an abandoned cabin on the shores of Split Lake.*

This form of physical displacement cascades into another form of displacement, specifically the displacement of knowledge. Particularly, the disruption in sharing of knowledge by being on the land carrying out land-based activities, in turn disrupting cultural practices across generations. With the inability to go out on the land, this knowledge displacement leads to disinterest and disengagement of traditional activities among younger community members.

"No, they're not interested either, to do anything like fishing. Trapping is a dying thing, you know. Not very many youths want to go even down the bank for a walk." Randal Linklater, O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation ᐅᐱᐴᓇᐱᐏᐣ

Cree language is incredibly descriptive with names for objects containing encoded ecological and spiritual information such as how to use them, where to find them, when to harvest them and other such descriptors. Similarly, concepts and related skills are learned by performing the language. Hence, the disinterest and disengagement in being on the land has the dire consequence of language loss. Language is a critical vessel for sharing knowledge of the land and understanding the land.

"A lot of the kids now growing up like these little ones, you know, they don't understand a word of Cree. They all talk English." Randal Linklater, O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation ᐅᐱᐴᓇᐱᐏᐣ

Participants expressed deep concerns about the implications of this knowledge disruption for future generations, linking changes in the environment, culture and language to changes in ways of being, culture and spirituality. All this highlights the very apparent and existential threat to the continuation of the Cree culture as illustrated below.

"Well, it's important because what are they gonna do? Sit inside and starve or what? You know, you grow up the traditional way. You have to keep going. Everybody will be at home sitting inside, you know, scary." Participant 6, O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation ᐅᐱᐴᓇᐱᐏᐣ

Archival research agreed with the concern that this displacement was part of a larger displacement, the displacement of identity. In the O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation meeting section from the review of the Regional Cumulative Effects Assessment, one participant mentioned that children had been pulled up by their roots. People no longer knew where they came from. One of the messages that community members delivered was that the interests, opinions, and knowledge of the community members had been ignored throughout the entire period of the development of the hydroelectric potential of the region.

An unexpected finding was spiritual displacement expressed through a profound feeling of grief among participants. This grief reflects a deep sense of loss of land, waters, and resulting losses of traditional activities and ultimately loss of an identity. This existential grief from cultural disruption is illustrated in the following statement of futility.

> *"I feel I felt like I wasted 30 years of my life just to see nothing," Calvin Baker, O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation* ᐅᐱᐹᓇᐱᐏᐣ

This sentiment of futility was repeated in different ways by different participants. For most, the increased difficulty in carrying out traditional practices results in additional separation from pieces of the land at a time.

> *"Well, now that there's nothing, nothing is worth doing anymore, like it's harder and harder to set a bunch of nets and you don't catch no fish. It's harder too, lot of work for nothing. Same with little trapping too. It's going down with bird prices are no good." Participant 6, O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation* ᐅᐱᐹᓇᐱᐏᐣ

Another theme within grief was the perception of confinement to increasingly limited territories in comparison to previous ways of living. Participants directly connecting cultural constraints, such as the inability to go trapping to psychological constraints of feeling confined.

> *"They have like a reserve. They have people that's your area. It's like a prison, whereas years ago, you could pass another trapper and say, hey, we'll see you next week." James Disbrowe, Tataskweyak Cree Nation* ᑕᑕᐢᑿᔭᕽ

For some, this spatial confinement was even directly linked to spiritual impacts such as demoralization within the individual and community. Several powerful comparisons were made to illustrate the real implications of this confinement.

> *"There's a lot of things that encompass what we're talking about, like the water taking the river away, and now we're like in a corral that we have to fly out to get pristine lakes. It's not like we can do it every day or every Sunday. It's really demeaning when your spirit is low, demoralizing." Jonathon Kitchekeesik, Tataskweyak Cree Nation* ᑕᑕᐢᑿᔭᕽ

Community members explained that these impacts were tied to fundamental violations of rights and autonomy. Here prevention of movement through the degradation of the environment and the inability to carry out land practices is being seen as a breach in treaty obligations.

> *"Why should we be homeless in our home, our own land. Why should we be tenants in our own lands? Why should we have to ask for authority to build cabins in our own territory? Why should we ask for permission to move a boat within our own territory? When the treaties clearly state that we had that, but why are they contradicting those same rights and those same treaties by telling us the opposite of what we're seeing today? So, it's not right, it's not fair, it's not legal, it's not moral." Robert Spence, Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔦᕽ*

Here, serious concerns are raised about confining a way of life into a bureaucratic process needing permission, thereby influencing land-based activities. The blatant disregard of rights and treaty obligations from external parties' interference was emphasized. Being at the mercy of the decisions of other parties was powerfully paralleled with the treatment of Indigenous rights to Sturgeon. Essentially, the impacts of hydro development have cascaded into impacts on land and cultural accessibility rights. This leaves individuals helpless, as was explained below.

> *"We do not need to be put underneath the microscope to be studied [to] the death like the sturgeon. The sturgeon were on the brink of extinction. They shared our same fate, because they have no rights. They're told they have rights. DFO [Department of Fisheries and Oceans] says they have rights, but their rights are being considered right now with SARA, Species at Risk Act, SARA is still trying to determine whether or not the species should be protected the same way, our rights are being questioned and being infringed upon and being chipped away little by little every day, how they're being made to live within certain confines, within a certain bubble, that aquarium is like us in the First Nations reserves, Indian Reservation, IR number 171, is Split Lake concentration camps. That's what those are, being made to live within those confines, the same way the Sturgeon is being made to live within a dwindling confine of its own environment, not by its own choosing, but by the design of the institutions that made it live within those confines, the governments and industry. So, we share their same fate, because they have*

no rights, just like us, they're trying to take away our rights. And why are we having to fight for our rights every day." Robert Spence, Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔭᕽ

The finality and irreversibility of developmental impacts were captured in Robert Spence's recollection of Victor Spence's statement after negotiations for the Keeyask Dam were concluded: *"After everything, he came and apologized. He said I'm sorry, I never knew it was going to be like this, but it was done."*

Figure 5: Image showing Notigi control structure scale.

Notigi Control Structure on the Churchill River Diversion captured by Bobbie Mangeli in October 2022.

Along with expressing sentiments of grief, participants expressed frustration with the dismissal of their concerns by governmental and institutional entities, particularly mentioning that it was historically proven that Manitoba Hydro and the government had higher regard for financial outcomes and profit than they had for the impacts they were causing on people and their lives.

"You know, when I talk to those Manitoba Hydro or any other government agent. I know. I know that it doesn't mean anything to them. Business-wise, from nine to five, I know, but I keep saying that in case there's somebody in there that I had a heart, you know, I'll keep

throwing it in there. Maybe somebody will get hit, somebody, and then understand, finally, what, what is, what is happening here." Jonathon Kitchekeesik, Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔦˣ

This is a description of the resilient efforts to communicate the impacts on people, even while remaining unheard. Along with external tensions towards members of Manitoba Hydro, participants alluded that internal tensions within communities were primarily being fueled by external forces. This contributes to the historically used divide-and-conquer tactic.

"Let's come through, resolve this, and not let Hydro get involved with what we're discussing right now... there's always that person that wants this a little more, and that person's gonna create that controversy and that argument just to satisfy his needs. He's gonna say, okay, they [Manitoba Hydro] offered me this. I'm taking it." James Disbrowe, Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔦˣ

As alluded to in the Fishing section (4.1.2), participants described the economic displacement resulting from the environmental changes. The declining number of community members carrying out land-based activities, as well as the decline in the number of fishers, hunters, and trappers, reveals the collapse of both cultural and contemporary economic models.

"We're losing out on millions of dollars. Not very many fishermen around, because before there were lots, nobody's interested, because you can't make any money because there's no fish." Calvin Baker, O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation ᐅᐱᐹᓇᐱᐃᐧᐣ

These words are from the fish plant manager who has firsthand seen the decline of the fishing economy. The introduction of transient workers only increases the economic tensions. This was felt particularly during the critical COVID-19 pandemic, where there was both scarcity in employment opportunities and real concerns of transient workers contributing to an already strained and insufficient health care system on reserve. One participant described the painful divisions created within families by external employment pressures:

"I have an uncle, and that works with Hydro. When we did that blockade, he asked my uncle, who was one of the representatives for Hydro to come and try to get us to open the

gate. And I told him straight out. I said, You're my uncle, you're a family member. You're a grandpa to my kids, yet you're coming here to tell me that this is all right, which it wasn't. You should see it right on my uncle's face. His face is what, like it was wrong for what they what they're trying to [do]." Participant 3, O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation ᐅᐱᐹᓇᐱᐏᐣ

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has documented the cumulative impacts of hydroelectric development through community testimonies in northern Manitoba. These impacts reveal the profound interconnectedness between cultural land-based practices, community continuity, and hydroelectric development.

The disruption of fishing, trapping, and land-based identity formation shows multiple forms of displacement beyond physical changes of these practices. Additionally, these forms of displacement constitute a systematic assault on the foundational elements that sustain Indigenous ways of being and knowing (Simpson, 2017). These practices are foundational to intergenerational knowledge transmission and community cohesion; they are deeply embedded in spiritual relationships with the land. It is crucial to consider the magnitude of importance of these actions as they cannot be simply replaced through compensation schemes or alternative employment opportunities.

The erosion of cultural continuity through hydroelectric development impacts creates effects that continue across generations. Disruption of cultural practices such as community sharing and reciprocity suggests disruptions to traditional knowledge systems. When traditional learning systems are disrupted and community sharing networks are fractured by physical displacement and environmental degradation, the very mechanisms that have sustained Indigenous communities for millennia are compromised (Kimmerer, 2013).

The alien nature of kinships is exposed through hydroelectric partnerships to reveal the fundamental incompatibility between Indigenous sovereignty and colonial resource extraction and values. The promises, partnerships, and agreements that characterize these relationships are often built on the assumption that Indigenous communities can be incorporated into Western economic frameworks, and by doing so, they have bettered themselves. However, the reality of

imbalanced (power) negotiations demonstrates that these arrangements serve primarily to legitimize the appropriation of Indigenous territories while maintaining the illusion of consent (Coulthard, 2014). This paternalistic nature of partnerships continues the infantilization of Indigenous governance, reducing complex nation-to-nation relationships to consultation exercises that prioritize every other development over community self-determination.

Chapter 5: Where we want to be

Introduction

This chapter builds upon the previous discussion of hydroelectric development's contemporary impacts by examining community expressions of sovereignty in response to hydroelectric processes, specifically focusing on Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔭᕽ. Through four specific case studies, the Letter of Assertion, experiences with a particular consultant, First Nations Drinking Water Settlement Agreement, and Robert Spence’s Dream, this chapter highlights how Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔭᕽ has actively practiced sovereignty. It demonstrates the importance of these practices in land and resource management within the context of hydro development.

Key to this discourse is the control and ownership of data. Indigenous communities must control research conducted on their territories, acknowledging that self-determination extends even into academic spaces (Wilson, 2008; Smith, 2012). Meaningful environmental research requires collaboration of different ways of knowing. This collaboration must recognize Indigenous knowledge systems as equally valid to Western scientific approaches (Berkes, 2012; McGregor, 2004).

Similar to community experiences outlined in this chapter, literature on environmental management shows tensions between traditional ecological knowledge and government assessment processes, particularly regarding water quality monitoring and species protection (Castleden et al., 2012; Conrad & Hilchey, 2011; Armitage et al., 2011). Even though Indigenous communities are increasingly developing independent monitoring, few studies examine how communities assert territorial authority over environmental data collection (Reed & Bruyneel, 2010; Nadasdy, 2003). However, available studies focus on southern Canadian or international contexts, leaving northern Manitoba's hydro-industrial landscape underrepresented (Kulchyski, 2005). This unequal representation in literature covers Manitoba's Churchill River system, where hydro development created complex impacts requiring community-led responses (Waldram, 1988; Tough, 1996).

Current research methodologies challenge deficit models of Indigenous participation. They are increasingly covering environmental sovereignty exercised through traditional land rights

assertion, community monitoring protocols, and strategic resistance to extractive industries (Simpson, 2017; Coulthard, 2014). However, there is still little coverage in Northern Manitoba that is specific to intergenerational knowledge transfer on land and youth environmental advocacy (Kimmerer, 2013; LaDuke, 1999). This chapter addresses these literature gaps through thematic examination of northern Manitoba community experiences of sovereignty in different expressions at the intersection of hydro development and water/land rights. This chapter hopes to create a unique approach for understanding Indigenous environmental sovereignty in practice.

By integrating methodological transparency with Indigenous epistemologies, this chapter provides a nuanced examination of sovereignty within hydroelectric development contexts. The following sections explore the themes that emerged from this analysis and their implications for understanding Indigenous land and resource governance.

Figure 6: Word Cloud showing data of themes by frequency of appearance.

Compiled by Bobbie Mangeli using thesis interviews.

Table of Themes – Chapter 5

Theme	Subtheme	Case Study
5. 1 Community sovereignty	5.1.1 Political context 5.1.2 Written proclamations of Sovereignty	5.1.3 Case study: Letter of Assertion as Reclaiming Territorial Sovereignty
5.2 Research sovereignty	5.2.1 Consultants and methods 5.2.3 Reclaiming Research Authority	5.2.2 Case Study: Experiences with North South Consultants
5.3 Environmental sovereignty	5.3.1 Data ownership 5.3.2 Land access and Control	5.3.3 Case Study: 2021 Safe Drinking Water for First Nations Class Action Settlement Agreement
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5.1 Community Sovereignty

Historical decision-making has prioritized industry and government at the expense of Indigenous communities. It is to redefine this process of decision-making for water and land that Tataskweyak Cree Nation decided to write a Letter of Assertion. The core of this letter is that the people living on this land are the best placed to make decisions about this land; in essence, that local decisions are best made locally. This is especially fundamental as Indigenous peoples have lived on the lands within and around the Tataskweyak Cree Nation land area for many generations. Thus, this letter is not a request for new responsibilities regarding land management but rather a reiterating reminder of existing land rights as the custodians of these lands. The goal of the letter of assertion is that Tataskweyak Cree Nation members have a true say and control of

all upcoming resource projects on these lands.

5.1.1 Political Context

In Manitoba, hydro development is a key political issue. The process of consultation for approval of hydro development projects also reflects this political reality. During the consultation process for the Keeyask Dam, the Clean Environment Commission Chairman explained this licensing and consultation process, including a reassurance that the process being carried out as well as its results were being made from a neutral position.

> *But when there [are] very large projects, or there are projects that might be politically sensitive, such as a generating station, then it is referred to the Clean Environment Commission. The project, the work that is under way right now at Keeyask, what they call the infrastructure project was issued a licence by Manitoba Hydro or pardon me, by Manitoba Conservation, so they could put this infrastructure in place. Now, that doesn't mean that the Clean Environment Commission is going to rubber stamp what Manitoba Hydro has asked for. It is still open to us, if at the end of two and a half, or three months of hearings, if we are not convinced that the project Keeyask Split Lake October, can go ahead without, without resulting in significant environmental damage. We could say no. We could recommend to the Minister that he not issue a licence. Chairman, Page, 38/39 October 8th, 2013, Keeyask Generation Project Public Hearing, Tataskweyak Cree Nation.*

While this was the intent of the commission, it will later be seen in an upcoming section about Project Timelines that the participants of this hearing at the time, had their doubts that this was a neutral process, that this project would inevitably be approved, favouring Manitoba Hydro and other provincial/governmental proponents. Participants recognize this trend of political interference regarding past and current hydro development proponents. Even during the interviews conducted in 2025, this was a continued theme.

> *"It seems as if, when we're when we're finally starting to get somewhere on a clear path forward. It gets diluted in that bullshit. It's like the Nelson River flowing down from the south, one main body of water flowing down a specific channel, then it hits Split Lake, the*

widening of the river, and it gets diluted. That's like our rights the path to get where we need to be to have our rights asserted and identified, just like with this. Yeah, but as soon as it comes to the politics of all these political parties, it gets diluted and lost in the mess, the confusion of the political parties." Robert Spence, Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔭᕽ

This quote illustrates the interconnectedness of hydro development to the politics of the day. As political manifestos regarding the stances of hydro vary, the impacts of hydro development on the lands and waters remain. The following statement points out that this connection extends even to the people, pointing it out as a crucial component of decision-making. The connectedness is further emphasized in the following quote.

"Wish we could isolate this as one issue. But it's all interconnected in a way, the people and it's important." Jonothan Kitchekeesik, Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔭᕽ

Here we see that issues of resource development are multifaceted and need to be treated as such throughout all planning and development phases. It is with this foundation that these issues are simply not environmental but also political and even personal, that we understand the need for sovereignty.

5.1.2 Written proclamations of sovereignty importance

This section examines the need for and importance of formal assertions of sovereignty as declarations of authority over land and water, and the past, current, and future resource extraction activities. The Letter of Assertion is a document written by the Tataskweyak Cree Nation reasserting their sovereignty on decision-making concerning any land and water resources. According to representatives from the Stewardship Centre, this document has been shared to various resource developers. It is a critical tool in challenging the power dynamics between Tataskweyak Cree Nation, the Government of Manitoba, and industry proponents (currently Manitoba Hydro and various mining companies) on the Split Lake Resource Management Area and the larger Tataskweyak Resource Area.

The assertion letter from Tataskweyak Cree Nation must be understood first within the historical context of resource extraction jurisdictions with no Indigenous input or consent. The 1931

National Resource Transfer Act (NRTA), in particular, is a pivotal historical moment that continues to shape present conflicts:

> *“Part of that, too, was because of the fact of the NRTA National Resource Transfer Act. What year was that done? 1931 anyways, that's when the federal government transferred control of land and resources within the province to the province… without consulting us, without asking us.” Robert Spence, Tataskweyak Cree Nation* ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔭᕽ

As stated, this transfer of resource management authority from federal to provincial jurisdiction occurred without Indigenous consultation or consent. This was the first ripple in the historical cascade of Indigenous exclusion in resource development decision-making. The proof of this pattern’s persistence is further illustrated in the process of decision-making regarding the Churchill River Diversion.

> *“Another example of that would be the CRD, the Churchill River Diversion. That’s our water, that's our resource. They decided to block it off and use it for their own benefit by diverting it without asking us, without telling us, without offering us anything. Those are prime examples of why we decided that letter is needed.” Robert Spence, Tataskweyak Cree Nation* ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔭᕽ

The Churchill River Diversion was first announced in 1966, issued an interim Water Power Act Licence for construction in 1973, became operational in 1976 and initiated the Augmented Flow Program in 1986 all without consent from the people who live on these lands and depended on water from the Churchill River namely O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation ᐅᐱᐳᐣᓇᐱ�札ᐣ (also known and referred to as South Indian Lake). There are numerous downstream communities impacted by the CRD namely, Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation, Tataskweyak Cree Nation, Fox Lake Cree Nation, Pimicikamak Cree Nation who had minimal if any consultation and participation in the earlier stages of the timeline. Only more recently was there the comprehensive hearing of Indigenous perspectives and presentation of community data, and despite this a Final Water Power Act Licence was issued in 2021. This historical example demonstrates the shortcomings of resource governance frameworks in with systematic

marginalization of Indigenous voices and resultant authority, necessitating the creation of a formal letter of assertions declaring sovereignty in decision making.

According to the Tataskweyak Environmental Monitoring Agency, the letter of assertion needed to be presented in a Western way, in writing. This is despite the fact that content in the letter is already well-known oral history within Cree culture.

> *"At what point does the oral history become? Stop being oral history if you have to write it down. But it's important that we have to, because that's all the Western world sees anything written down on a piece of paper, documented as proof we're no longer considered proof enough." Robert Spence, Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔭᕽ referencing Jonothan Kitchekeesik.*

This letter is hence a formal declaration on the Indigenous authority over traditional territories. This letter is intent on challenging decision-making processes that have excluded and/or disregarded input from Cree Nations the caretakers of traditional lands. This letter mandates the inclusion, respect and serious consideration of input from all who take care of the lands in this resource management area.

> *"That's why we came up with the declaration letter. It's actually an assertion of our own authority over our own wills, our own lines, our own territory, how we do not want the decisions made in the south, to dictate the terms by how we live in the north, without our own input." Robert Spence, Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔭᕽ*

This statement also points out a lack of spatial balance in decision making. Specifically, that the decisions affecting northern Cree communities are often made in the south by government centers and government-adjacent bodies without meaningful Cree participation.

> *"We already see the impacts. Hydro says minimum impact. It is easy for them to say that they don't live here, and yet, we are percent affected by Kelsey, Limestone, Kettle, Long Spruce, Wuskwatim." Janet McIvor, October 8th, 2013, Keeyask Generation Project*

Public Hearing, Tataskweyak Cree Nation.

Therefore, this statement shows how assertion letters are also being used as a political tool that contests the imbalance in the north-south power dynamics regarding resource governance. The issuance of the letters ultimately serves as the formal assertion of Indigenous sovereignty in resource management. By disregarding and dismissing these letters, bodies are furthering the infantilization of Indigenous governance pertaining to resource management.

Despite the formal written nature of this letter of assertion, participants report that government responses have been inadequate if at all present. Approaches to engagement since the letter of assertion was introduced has largely maintained status quo as illustrated below.

> *“British Crown consultation is basically just a white paper at this point, so we sent out a letter to the government. They're aware of it. They know our stand but it's like Robert said that that is just being ignored. Yeah, basically just being ignored.” Mike Moose, Tataskweyak Cree Nation* ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔭᕽ

This dismissive response to assertion letters parallels the willful negligence of governmental institutions towards Indigenous governance authority. This statement shows the maintenance of existing power dynamics despite the knowledge of information included in this letter. receipt of the letter of assertion.

5.1.3 Case study: Letter of Assertion as reclaiming territorial sovereignty

This section provides details of the implications of the Letter of Assertion letter as a reclamation of territorial sovereignty. During the interviews, a participant shares the Manitoba Government’s reaction to receiving the letter contextualizing the letter to the existing power dynamics. He elaborates on how governments maintain existing power dynamics, not making attempts to understand or change the status quo, despite knowledge of Indigenous assertions. The Letter of Assertion here is also connected to potential changes in protocols, procedures and policy is made in the quote below.

“They're waiting to see what we do with it. They know of it, but it’s still business as usual with them. They're still, they're still engaging the First Nations the same way that they've always been. They want to use their procedures and their protocols for whatever development that they want to do.” Jonothan Kitchekeesik, Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔭᕽ

This link shows that the mere acknowledgement of the letter of assertion and its components is inseparably linked to changes in established procedures and policy. The government's further insistence on following established procedures rather than acknowledging Indigenous protocols represents a significant barrier to meaningful recognition of Indigenous authority. Historically, standard procedures and protocols have often prioritised Manitoba Hydro over community. Industries have been reacting to impacts that have happened rather than proactively preventing impacts. Another key theme emerging from the interviews is the need to transition from this impact and then response model toward proactive engagement approach for all forms of resource related governance.

“The same thing goes back to the Valley and the mining company, mining industry, rather than them going ahead and doing this, and then a few years later, apologizing for the damages that they didn't foresee. When an assertion letter comes in, it's telling them that you have to talk to me before you apologize a few years down the road. We have to know what's going on to better protect our people, rather than just to get an apology by the Prime Minister or somebody.” Jonothan Kitchekeesik, Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔭᕽ

This shows that a key component of the assertion letters is requiring meaningful involvement before and within project planning and implementation. This challenges the historical pattern of consultation where Indigenous communities are asked to check the box on already established project plans, informed of the Indigenous naming of such projects without the inclusion of ceremony and later receiving only symbolic apologies for damages. The assertion letter asks for a complete change to this dynamic. This letter challenges the ongoing dispossession of land and authority experienced by members of Tataskweyak Cree Nation. This following series of questions highlights the tedious and infantilizing processes of approval needed for any activities

to be carried out on the land. It was mentioned earlier in this paper and is included again for emphasis on fundamental community concerns.

> *"That's what the that's part of where that came from, that assertion of authority, declaration of our own rights on our own lands, our assertion to our own lands, our authority on our own lands. Because why should we be homeless in our home, our own land. Why should we be tenants in our own lands? Why should we have to ask for authority to build cabins in our own territory? Why should we ask for permission to move a boat within our own territory? ... When the treaties clearly state that we had that [inherent land rights], but why are they contradicting those same rights and those same treaties by telling us opposite of what we're seeing today? So, it's not right, it's not fair, it's not legal, it's not moral." Robert Spence, Tataskweyak Cree Nation* ᑕᑕᐢᑫᐧᔭᕽ

These questions and statements challenge the historic and contemporary systems that position Indigenous peoples as needing to seek permission to exercise rights within their own territories. They also point to the inconsistencies between these processes of approval and the application of treaty rights. The letter of assertion thereby questions contemporary government practices that are in direct conflict with treaty rights and processes. This challenge proposes the reassessment of the current legal resource management frameworks and proposes the inclusion of a moral basis of assessment. These changes would place Indigenous people as more than wards of the state, Indigenous lands as unoccupied vast North, and projects as life and lifestyle altering events. This hybrid approach would be better suited to understand and determine decision making in a fair, holistic way that is closest to Cree values. The following quote has also been included again for emphasis of concerns.

> *"And that's why, you know, when I talk to those Manitoba Hydro or any other government agent. I know, I know that it doesn't mean nothing to them. Business wise, from nine to five, I know, but I keep saying that in case there's somebody in there that has a heart, you know, I'll keep throwing it in there. Maybe somebody will get hit and then understand finally, what happening here." Jonothan Kitchekeesik, Tataskweyak Cree Nation* ᑕᑕᐢᑫᐧᔭᕽ

This statement portrays the experiences with decision makers as being sterile i.e. devoid of seeing the humanity in the people whose lives they are altering. Community members constantly emphasized their humanity over time as an attempt to have decision makers think beyond the status quo i.e. beyond the profitability of projects and have them think into the complete impacts of their decisions. The same is illustrated in the quote below.

> *"Don't look at the profits all of the time. We are human beings here." Ms. Janet McIvor, October 8th, 2013, Keeyask Generation Project public hearing, Tataskweyak Cree Nation.*

In reframing decision making beyond the legal and environmental lenses, the inclusion of this moral perspective acknowledges this simple truth. Projects have impacted people in the past, are impacting people now and will impact people in the future. Thus, participants emphasized the importance of reclaiming territorial sovereignty in determining the direction for future development.

> *"Just like with past projects and impacts and effects from these developments that have happened, we've been left to pick up the pieces of what's left and make something out of those pieces. It's like each time that happens, a bigger chunk of the puzzle has been taken away, and we're left with a smaller puzzle to put back together when it the narrative is controlled by government and industry when it should be ours to determine what our, what the narrative should be for us and what's best for us and our people and our future generations, not the other way around." Robert Spence, Tataskweyak Cree Nation*
> ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔭᕽ

This metaphor of decreasing puzzle pieces illustrates several things simultaneously. It points to the reduction of land base, water quality and authority over remaining land making it a seemingly impossible puzzle to complete. However, the reclamation of control through assertion of sovereignty offers a hope of better management of remaining resources. This would ensure true decision-making authority for future generations to have access to both resources and

governance systems that reflect Indigenous values and priorities. One of the aspects that would benefit greatly from a change in approach would be the ongoing research on these lands.

5.2 Research Sovereignty

Across Canada, Indigenous communities are challenging conventional research paradigms and reclaiming authority over knowledge production regarding their territories and experiences. The concept of research sovereignty is a critical piece of environmental governance, where communities assert control over how research is conducted on their lands a well as how findings are interpreted and applied in various decision-making processes (The First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2024)

5.2.1 Consultants and Methods

In the interviews, participants expressed several shortcomings in current research methodologies that are used to assess environmental impacts in Indigenous territories. The same is true for historical research approaches surrounding major infrastructure projects – these methods have excluded Indigenous knowledge systems thereby failing to anticipate long-term consequences. One example of failures in engagement is confirmed in this excerpt from the Regional Cumulative Effects Assessment. It discusses research methods employed during the Churchill River Diversion project.

> *"The community members noted that at the time the diversion was put into operation, researchers did not have a clear idea of what its impact would be or how long it would take for the environment to return to some form of equilibrium. And, although research was undertaken at the time, there was no effort to engage local people in the research to gain from their knowledge." Regional Cumulative Effects Assessment p44, Section 6.10.2*

This exclusion of participation in the research methodology has resulted in research that both misunderstands environmental processes and underestimates its impacts. In addition to exclusion, there exists intentional misconstruing and obstruction of information that serves the self interests of individuals and corporations. With similar benefits, the skewing of results to fit the narrative of the funder was mentioned severally in participant accounts. Here, consulting

companies are being accused of providing results that align with their funder's objectives, essentially, with Manitoba Hydro objectives.

> *"I'm concerned about the fact that there is a small group of people who are very content with the amount of money they can make off of serving Hydro's interests much more than the community's interests nominally in the work for the community." Dr. Peter Kulchyski, 6th January 2014, p6402 Keeyask Generation Project Public Hearing, Winnipeg.*

This quote insinuates that various individuals are benefitting monetarily from certain outcomes making these processes detrimental rather than beneficial to communities. These individuals or entities are referred to as "predatory".

> *"I have some very harsh things in my report to say about predator consultants, and that's not merely in the abstract. They have been involved in this process and, you know, there are people who are in very desperate circumstances and large amounts of money throwing around, and I don't see any concern for the people in desperate circumstances in a lot of the places where the money flows." Dr. Peter Kulchyski, 6th January 2014, p6403 Keeyask Generation Project Public Hearing, Winnipeg.*

Similar harms whether unintentional or not, are undertaken when external individuals are charged with gathering empirical data for environmental assessment purposes. Here entities gather, label and determine data outcomes from a distance without context of lived experience as a longstanding consulting practice where researchers have significant experiential lapses. They neither spend adequate time on the land for multi-faceted research and neither do they process the data in collaboration with community members; this process is geographically separated. It is important to consider that bureaucracy or contractual obligations of consulting work contribute to these strains, however there are many missed opportunities for connection.

> *"It's been criticized as such that this bureaucratic version of the traditional knowledge and the world view that gives it meaning is, in many cases, used against the communities themselves because often it isn't grounded in what people feel is important and what gives their lives and their communities meaning." Dr. Stephane McLachlan University of*

Manitoba 6th January, p6458 Hearing Transcript, Clean Environment Commission Hearings, Winnipeg.

This sterilization of data from lived experiences cannot adequately explain the data retrieved, causing for an inevitable imbalance in technical reports and lived accounts. This imbalanced narrative has been the experience of community members with most consultants over time. However, this does not negate the contribution of lateral violence to these processes.

> *"One of those lawyers and consultants involved in it may have been, you know, being of First Nations origin doesn't entirely free you from having a self-interest that might not, or that might collide with the self-interest of your community." Dr. Peter Kulchyski, 6th January 2014, p6406 Keeyask Generation Project Public Hearing, Winnipeg.*

This continued practice of putting individual or corporation interests above community interests, even laterally, points to a consulting culture that is detrimental to well-informed community decision-making. In the following section the issues raised are further explained in the context of dealings with North South Consultants.

5.2.2 Case Study: Experiences with consultants

An example of these destructive practices is seen in the community experiences with North South Consultants. It is explained that conventional research, even when undertaken with community members does not represent reality. In the following illustration, an official from the Tataskweyak Cree Nation Stewardship Centre describes the discrepancies between what is observed during research activities and what appears in final reports.

> *"When we work with North South Consultants, which is, you know, funded by Manitoba Hydro, when we when we work with them, we see a lot of things that were that were not good for the people and not good for the lake or the fish or anything. But when it was time for them to report it, none of that stuff was on there. Nothing negative was reported to Manitoba Hydro. And then it went past with flying colors." Jonothan Kitchekeesik, Tataskweyak Cree Nation* ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔦᕽ

This pattern of selective reporting is a fundamental problem in conventional research practices, where conclusions appear somewhat biased rather than emerging from the empirical evidence and Indigenous knowledge. These discrepancies between observed conditions and formal research outcomes creates a gap in credibility that continues to undermine trust in external research consultants. The following shows the isolation of impacts on the same river system as a methodological lapse. This crucial lapse identified by community members involves the consideration of baseline conditions in environmental impact assessments.

> *"The environmental assessment people there, North South, they came here. They painted a picture that the impacts of the dam being built would be minimal. That's the word that they gave at the end of the report. But they didn't think that the damage was already done, from the previous dams that were built in the diversion itself, the Churchill River Diversion itself, that brought all this bad water here, the damage was done already."*
> *Mike Moose, Tataskweyak Cree Nation* ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔭᕽ

This quote illustrates the importance of temporal framing, that is defining the correct point of reference in time that is to be used as a baseline for comparison of impacts. Where there is incorrect temporal framing, pre-existing damage from prior development becomes normalized as the baseline condition. Given the incorrect point of reference, there is then an underestimation of cumulative effects allowing for incremental degradation to be labeled as "minimal impact". This framing also fails to account for the historical continuity of environmental changes and disregards the cumulative nature of impacts from multiple development projects. Thus, static research methods are a methodological failure.

Static research is research carried out at a specific point in time and can only create and draw from a limited data pool. Static research is also often undertaken by proponent that are external to the communities. Contrary to static research is a long-term lived experiences approach, where observational and other forms of community research have been carried out over longer periods of time and hence has a much wider data pool. To their detriment, industry has often only drawn from the smaller data pools of static research. This creates tension between community-based data, and externally produced data, alluding to the former lacking credibility. The following description shows that external parties would rather undertake their own research than use

existing community data only to “discover” claims that have already been made by community members.

> *“We already noticed that the fish were getting low. The water wasn't as good as it used to be. And even the birds, that the migratory birds they wouldn't stage here anymore, here or at or at Keeyask. And then when they were doing their study, they noticed that too, but we noticed it years before, and then they said on their report that that damage would be minimal and that it would recover, but it's not. That's not the case. So that wasn't an honest report.” Mike Moose, Tataskweyak Cree Nation* ᑕᑕᐢᑿᔭᕽ

The insistence on static research despite the availability of longstanding community data reveals how conventional research frameworks devalue Indigenous knowledge systems. Treating them as an add on rather than foundational to understanding environmental change. However, this long term and in-depth understanding of the environment places Indigenous communities as an authority on environmental research and management.

> *“We are not newcomers to conservation; we are the original conservationists. And yet, Indigenous science continues to be treated as secondary, something that must be “integrated” into Western methods rather than being recognized as a legitimate and equal knowledge system. Why is it always Indigenous knowledge that must be “bridged” with Western science? Why is it never the other way around?” Taylor Galvin, Winnipeg Free Press Op-Ed May 2025*

A credibility gap is created where imbalances in data authority undermine Indigenous lived experiences and perspectives. The credibility gap is widened when external researchers’ claims directly contradict the realities of ongoing community realities, even going as far as impacting health of community members. This denial of lived experiences by external research that can only be described as deceptive is illustrated below.

> *“And then he turns around says, but our science proves that your water is good. But he's not the one who's burying the people in the community from one cancer related death after another, after another, after another, after another, within each within different families, so many right after another, passing away from cancers, another, sicknesses,*

illnesses and diseases attributed from the water." Robert Spence, Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔭᕽ

This statement highlights how scientific claims about environmental safety can be hazardous as they do not account for or contradict community experiences with health impacts. Further, community members pointed out the compartmentalization of issues as a critical methodological failure of ongoing research, the current methods separate ecological components from human impacts. This limitation on research framing is demonstrated in the following statement.

> *"That's the reason why we see the need to do our own studies, our own environments, environmental studies on our own environment. And one thing too, is that they're willing to study the birds, the fish, the water, the bugs, but they don't want to study us. We're part of that environment. They didn't want to look at the impacts that it would have on us. That's where they made a mistake as well. And when we do our studies, we study it on how it affects us human beings." Mike Moose, Tataskweyak Cree Nation* ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔭᕽ

This critique reveals how conventional research practices separate people from ecological systems, not recognizing Indigenous peoples as integral components of the environments under the studies. This compartmentalization allows for ecological impacts to be deemed acceptable without consideration of their human consequences. The statement also indicates a fundamental difference in research orientation, where community-led research centers human wellbeing within ecological contexts rather than treating these as separate fields. These differences in focus are multifaceted, with one being that researchers are far removed from the lands they are studying. Likewise, resource governance frameworks are as a result or at the very least are influenced by power dynamics between the North and South of Manitoba. Community members consistently identify the impact of the geographic distance between decision-makers and affected communities. Thus, creating not only decisions that are disconnected from reality but also gaps in accountability as decisions are being implemented remotely.

> *"We already see the impacts. Hydro says minimum impact. It is easy for them to say that they don't live here, and yet, we are percent affected by Kelsey, Limestone, Kettle, Long Spruce, Wuskwatim." Janet McIvor, Tataskweyak Cree Nation, Hearing Transcript, Clean Environment Commission Hearings.*

This statement highlights a spatial disconnect specifically pointing out “minimal impact” as a statement that can only be made from a place of disconnect as it is indirect conflict with the realities faced. It emphasizes the physical distance between decision makers and the consequences of their decisions. The phrase “it is easy for them to say” underscores how this spatial separation enables such statements that cannot be made by individuals affected by the impacts. This disparity is relevant not only to current decision making but to future impacts and even future decision making.

> *“The decisions that are being made in the south are dictated to us. [We are told] how we are supposed to live in the north, by people who do not live in the North, who do not walk in our moccasins, who do not live with the same impacts and effects that we have to live with day in and day out. We do not want those same things for our future generations, we want our future generations to be protected by the work that we do here today, for them to safeguard their futures, because it should not be government, corporations and other industries to shape our paths forward.” Robert Spence, Tataskweyak Cree Nation*
> ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔭᕽ

This statement shows research governance as part of the larger colonial administration where southern institutions dictate northern realities. “Walking in our moccasins” emphasizes how experiential knowledge is devalued within contemporary research methodology that privileges western empirical research over lived experience. This is despite lived experiences being a long-term and intergenerational source of information. This same preference for Western Science is confirmed in a report presented during the CEC hearings for Tataskweyak Cree Nation.

> *“I would agree in all of those cases that the science and technical thinking dominated over the ATK [Aboriginal Traditional Knowledge] despite claims to the contrary.” Dr. Stephane McLachlan University of Manitoba 6th January, p6458 Hearing Transcript, Clean Environment Commission Hearings, Winnipeg.*

This statement forms the basis of the argument that decision making is imbalanced, since knowledge values do not bear the same authority. This imbalance is situated in the geographic

south (Winnipeg as the decision-making hub), and north (as sites of the dams and damages). The north-south dynamic then extends from simply being a decision-making issue but also an issue of unequal harms and benefits. Thus, this issue is an environmental injustice issue. Participants explained that communities in close proximity to hydro development are burdened with numerous impacts with hardly any benefits of hydro development, whereas communities far from the hydro development received all the benefits and little if any impacts. The following is confirmed by a participant from an upstream community O-Pipon-Na-Pi-Win Cree Nation.

> *"Well, probably for the people down south, not for the people who live on the land that get affected, devastated, just, but not for the people up north. They don't benefit. They don't get nothing out of it." Calvin Baker, O-Pipon-Na-Pi-Win Cree Nation.*

When speaking on if there were any benefits of hydro, participants noted an imbalance of benefits and impacts. This statement identifies how conventional decision making facilitates development patterns where benefits flow southward while impacts remain concentrated in northern communities. The same pattern is confirmed in the Regional Cumulative Effects Assessment.

> *"An underlying message from the meeting was the lack of social justice; people felt a community had been destroyed and a lifestyle lost in order to enrich people who lived elsewhere." Regional cumulative effects assessment for hydroelectric developments on the Churchill, Burntwood, and Nelson River systems: Integrated summary report. 2013 Manitoba Hydro.*

Both Calvin Baker and these statements situate research sovereignty within broader questions of environmental justice, where control over knowledge or data "production" processes directly shapes how benefits and harms are distributed across geographic and social boundaries.

5.2.3 Reclaiming research authority through community-led approaches

As a result of these experiences with consultants, communities are taking steps to reclaim their authority. A foundational principle in asserting research sovereignty involves recognizing the authority of direct lived experience as being equal and even surpassing conventional research methods.

“You are your own best witness, the people who are impacted, affected and live 24/7 with the impacts and the effects of development in all forms are their own best witnesses.” Robert Spence, Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔦᕽ

This statement challenges conventional research hierarchies that privilege external expertise over lived experience. Community members being the “best witnesses” is a direct contradiction of current knowledge hierarchies now centering experiential knowledge as the most authoritative source of information about environmental conditions as only people living on affected lands can truly appreciate the scope of impacts both short and long term. This reframing provides the foundation for asserting community control over research processes.

This statement identifies a fundamental limit to knowledge acquisition that cannot be overcome through conventional scientific methodologies, the comprehensive understanding that comes only through sustained inhabitation of a place. This epistemological claim provides the rationale for centering community knowledge within research frameworks. Community members identify fundamental differences in the motivational orientations that shape research processes.

“Who has more at stake to take care of the land, to the people on the land?” Jonothan Kitchekeesik, Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔦᕽ

This question identifies how different relationships to place create different research incentives. Those with direct dependence on territorial integrity have fundamentally different stakes in research outcomes than those whose relationship to the territory is mediated through professional advancement or corporate profit.

“But they don't see the real people that live here. All they see is a poacher or something like that. You know, that's and that's why it's important for the people to take care of themselves, rather than the person that's compelled by paycheck or goal, to climb up hierarchy ladder.” Jonothan Kitchekeesik, Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔦᕽ

This statement contrasts community motivations for research (self-determination and stewardship) with external motivations (professional advancement and financial compensation). The reference to being seen as “a poacher” highlights how conventional research frameworks often position Indigenous peoples as environmental problems rather than as stewards and

knowledge holders. Beyond critiquing conventional approaches, communities are actively developing alternative research methods. Robert Spence, Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔭᕽ describes the establishment of a community environmental monitoring agency:

> *"So that the work that we do here, now today will safeguard their futures, so that they'll have something that we can hand off, over to them to use as their tools, as a means to ensure that their future generations will also be protected, and to ensure that their future generations will also have that peace of mind and security, knowing that nobody's going to with them as long as that, that the work that we've set out under TEMA [Tataskweyak Environmental Monitoring Agency], that's in English." Robert Spence, Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔭᕽ*

This initiative represents a concrete manifestation of research sovereignty that moves beyond critique to create alternative institutional frameworks for knowledge production. The reference to "their tools" positions these institutions as mechanisms for intergenerational knowledge transfer that will enable future generations to maintain control over how their territories are understood and managed.

Research sovereignty initiatives seek to shift community involvement from reactive responses to proactive participation in research design. Robert Spence, Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔭᕽ describes the absence of engagement around renewable energy development:

> *"None of them have engagement with us, or, I believe, any First Nations about the location of about the location of this wind farms, and what the possible effects and impacts would be on the wind farms, with our ways of life here in the North. Like has anybody ever asked us? Listen, you guys have been saying there's hardly any geese anymore in your area, that the mic the migratory birds that go through your area have decreased the numbers. Why do you think that is?" Robert Spence, Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔭᕽ*

This statement identifies how conventional research frameworks fail to integrate community observations into research design. The rhetorical questions highlight how community knowledge about ecological changes (declining goose populations) could inform research questions if communities were involved in research design rather than merely as subjects of study. This

approach to research design would fundamentally alter what questions get asked and what phenomena are deemed worthy of investigation.

Research sovereignty emerges as a critical component of broader assertions of Indigenous authority over territories and resources. By challenging conventional research methodologies, rethinking north-south power dynamics, and building alternative research infrastructures, communities are reclaiming control over how knowledge about their territories is produced and applied. These initiatives represent not merely methodological innovations but fundamental challenges to colonially structured knowledge systems that have historically marginalized Indigenous experiences and perspectives. Through asserting research sovereignty, communities are positioning themselves not merely as research subjects but as authoritative knowledge producers whose experiences and observations must be centered in environmental governance frameworks.

5.3 Environmental Sovereignty

Indigenous environmental sovereignty refers to the inherent right of Indigenous Peoples to govern and protect their traditional lands, waters, and ecosystems according to their own laws, knowledge systems, and cultural values i.e. a nation's right to control and manage its natural resources and environmental policies without external interference (Coulthard, 2014). Environmental sovereignty is part of data sovereignty as it is the assertion of Indigenous control over the collection, use, and governance of data related to their lands and communities. The right to meaningful consultation is also a part of environmental sovereignty as it is what dictates the proceeding processes of decision-making. Together, these issues reveal how the reclamation of environmental sovereignty covers the stewardship of land and water as well as reclamation of data and decision authority, making activities like the 2021 Safe Drinking Water for First Nations Class Action Settlement Agreement possible.

5.3.1 Data Ownership

Throughout the data, an emergent theme was the importance of communities owning and using their own data. As was mentioned in previous sections, the long-term mistrust between

Tataskweyak Cree Nation and the government necessitated the creation, management and utilization of data by the community, participants explained that there are these longstanding tensions between government, and the community are from government assessments directly contradicting community experiences of water quality.

> *"And this is the same government has been telling us for the past - in the words of the Canada's Health representative, who comes here, who's still coming here, who says, for the past 30 years, we've been coming here to prove that your water is good, and for the past 30 years, I've had to listen to your past elders and your chiefs and council say, water bad. Water bad." Robert Spence, Tataskweyak Cree Nation* ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔦᕽ

Here we see that this mistrust was built over several decades. It is also evident based on this quote that the representative in question had a bias in favour of the government given the starting point of monitoring was not neutral but to prove that the water was good. The participant emphasized that the lawsuit served to validate long standing community knowledge that had been systematically and continuously dismissed by government authorities. It is because of this demonstrated deception that the community seeks to maintain control over environmental data, community data control emerged as a key theme throughout the interviews. Data Sovereignty was deemed crucial by several participants.

> *"We've already got all that information. We've already got all the Indigenous knowledge, cultural the history and Western science. What do you what else do you want? Do you want to enforce your own narrative on this? And that's not going to happen. That's what we're trying to do. That's all we're trying to stop. That's what we're trying to prevent from happening. Because we want everything cataloged from now on, because it we've seen time and time again, Indigenous knowledge and our oral histories are being superseded by laws made by the colonial system that only serve to disregard our beliefs and our ways and our spiritual laws, our cultural laws, traditional laws, we'll not have that happen anymore." Robert Spence, Tataskweyak Cree Nation* ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔦᕽ

This statement demonstrates the community's commitment to maintaining control over data narratives thereby preventing the marginalization of Indigenous knowledge systems in decision-making processes. This is with the hope to reflect the realities of impacts on all fronts, health,

economic, and even spiritual. Participants articulated the spiritual significance of water quality issues. Several participants described the cultural implications of relying on bottled water, with all pointing to bottled water as being devoid of spirit. When speaking on the importance of advocacy for clean drinking water, one participant mentioned the following

> *"To try and ensure that our future generations would have that right to clean drinking water, and that it not come from any more plastic bottles, that it the spirit of the water is not taken from the water right now. That water is as hollow as an empty bottle. The properties that made it, that made it a spiritual living being, have been taken away from it that just fills your belly, because the properties and the medicines that flow into the water from the lands around it is what makes it alive." Robert Spence, Tataskweyak Cree Nation* ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔦᕽ

This statement reveals the holistic relationships between water quality, spiritual well-being, and cultural practices within the community. It is emphasized that the impacts of water are not simply environmental but also extend to being impacts on the spirituality and culture of a people.

5.3.2 Project Timings

In previous sections it was established that power imbalances and fundamental distrust are basis of the community actions towards reclamation of research and environmental sovereignty. This section now discusses compressed timelines as yet another characteristic of a flawed engagement process. It will look at compressed timelines and the associated inequities that characterize resource development consultation processes in Tataskweyak Cree Nation. These flaws undermine the legitimacy of consultation frameworks and contribute to ongoing patterns of environmental injustice. This recurring theme in community experiences is lack of meaningful engagement, a procedural inequity. Particularly, that consultation in the past has been a notification process rather than a genuine opportunity to contribute to or influence decision outcomes.

> *"I got a sense that at some level, people were quite cynical about this process and the opportunity to change the course of events that seem to be transpiring up there. And that certainly some people were optimistic about the opportunities that would arise from*

Keeyask which I also talked about in my report. But certainly, there was an overtone there of again heavy hearts where people just felt that at some point it was inevitable. And that regardless of how they felt that the momentum was already in place that the project would go ahead." Dr. Stephane McLachlan University of Manitoba 6th January, p6458 Hearing Transcript, Clean Environment Commission Hearings, Winnipeg.

Similar to the information from an earlier chapter, this statement points to consultation as a box checking activity, showing them as performances of engagement that disguise predetermined outcomes. The quote indicates that community members feel that they have no room for meaningful contribution despite this being a new project. The same is expressed by a community member from a nearby community hinting this approach routinely excludes meaningful engagement, that this is not a procedural anomaly.

"So, for me, the way I look at it, the process was backwards, it was flip-flopped. There was more promises and money put on the table first, before a full understanding of impacts and effects. So, like I say, to me, I saw it as backwards. It was putting -- how do you call that -- the cart before the horse, so to speak." Wyne Redhead, Fox Lake Cree Nation Hearing Transcript, Clean Environment Commission Hearings.

"The cart before the horse" effectively shows that understanding of impacts should be done before benefit negotiations. Similarly, we see that all efforts towards consultations are made after crucial decisions have been made.

"Hey, listen, I got a project in mind, but where we already made the decisions on when it's going to start, where it's going to be, and how it's going to be, and who's going to be involved. You want to come and talk about it after everything is said and done." Robert Spence, Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔭᕽ

This statement reveals the after the fact nature of consultation, where engagement procedures occur only after critical decisions have been made. These engagements are not meaningful consultation, as they occur "after everything is said and done." This timing of engagement, consultation after decision-making proves that such processes do not represent genuine opportunities for community influence, in line with community perspectives that they are being asked to agree to terms and documenta that they do not fully understand. That the community

evaluation piece is not fair as the community does not have enough time or information to make a well-informed decision. The same is confirmed in the following statement made during the Keeyask Hearings.

> *"Let them know the fact, let them know the other kind of deals that exist and let them make the decision. But if you come to them and tell them there's one kind of deal, this is what it is, sign on the dotted line, then, you know, the First Nation leadership doesn't have an adequate basis of information to make a properly informed decision from." Dr. Peter Kulchyski, 6th January 2014, p6407 Keeyask Generation Project Public Hearing, Winnipeg.*

In addition to inadequate information, another significant procedural inequity identified by community members is the time differences given to engage with project information. Participants mentioned this as varying greatly between different stakeholders, with community members feeling pressured to make decisions on projects that have been planned and available to Manitoba Hydro for longer periods of time.

> *"At the time of the voting we were given three months to vote yes or no, to think about it. Whereas they took eight years to compile this big document. And you can tell most people are not - that it was written by lawyers, and stuff, and, they want, expected us to make that decision within three months." Ila Disbrowe, October 8th, 2013, Keeyask Generation Project Public Hearing, Tataskweyak Cree Nation.*

This statement contrasts the eight years allocated for document preparation with the three months provided for community review and decision-making. This time difference vividly illustrates the procedural advantage available to project planners in controlling the pace and process of engagement. Further, the reference to the document being "written by lawyers" highlights that the lack of document accessibility is another factor to deal with within the compressed timelines.

> *"Many of us believe that Keeyask will get built regardless of what we want. Manitoba Hydro has so much power that they will get what they want no matter what. So, there was a real pressure to agree to get something from this next project instead." Marilyn Mazurat, October 8th, 2013, Keeyask Generation Project public hearing, Tataskweyak Cree Nation.*

This statement reveals how power dynamics increase the pressure of decision-making, with communities feeling compelled to accept limited benefits rather than risk receiving nothing. Consultation here is far from a process geared towards free, prior, and informed consent and is now a process geared towards community concession. In addition to procedural advantages, community members also identified regulatory advantages. An example of this is the project momentum created by starting projects even before their approval. This enforces community perspectives that their contributions are irrelevant, as making substantive changes is increasingly difficult as development proceeds.

> *"Janet, you also asked, what was the purpose of the CEC hearings, given that there is work already going on site. But when there is [are] very large projects, or there are projects that might be politically sensitive, such as a generating station, then it is referred to the Clean Environment Commission. The project, the work that is under way right now at Keeyask, what they call the infrastructure project was issued a licence by Manitoba Hydro or pardon me, by Manitoba Conservation, so they could put this infrastructure in place." The Clean Environment Commission Chairman, October 8th, 2013, Keeyask Generation Project public hearing,*

This statement inadvertently confirms community members' narratives of pre-determined project plans. By creating categories for earlier approval, such as "infrastructure", regulatory frameworks allow physical transformation of sites to proceed before overall project approval. Even though the risks of potentially foregone costs are to be borne by project proponents, this is both a procedural and regulatory advantage rendering the environmental assessment processes performative. This performative nature of environmental assessments and consultation reinforces fundamental power imbalances between these Cree communities and project proponents, also confirmed by nearby communities.

> *"There is a lot of things that need to be fixed. There is a lot of things that need to be learned on both ends, both sides. And one of them is trust. We don't trust you. It is as simple as that. And you need to gain that trust by acknowledging our timeline. By acknowledging our interests, and our rights." Conway Arthurson from Fox Lake Cree Nation, Keeyask Generation Project public hearing held in Tataskweyak Cree Nation.*

This statement articulates how trust can be gained despite systematic erosion. “Acknowledging our timeline” positions respect for community timeframes as essential to rebuilding trust. “Acknowledging our interests and rights” further emphasizes how procedures and regulations must recognize the political status of Indigenous communities as rights-holders rather than merely stakeholders. These procedural failures cannot be addressed through minor technical adjustments but require fundamental restructuring, the first step of this being acknowledgement of failures despite raised concerns.

5.3.3 Case Study: 2021 Safe Drinking Water for First Nations Class Action Settlement Agreement

Figure 7: Construction of a freshwater line from Assean Lake.

Photographs taken on March 18th, 2025, by Bobbie Mangeli.

In 2019, Tataskweyak Cree Nation participated in a national class action lawsuit addressing drinking water inadequacies on First Nation reserves across Canada. The Federal Court approved the settlement in 2021, resulting in an $8 billion agreement that included $6 billion for infrastructure development, $1.5 billion in individual compensation, and $400 million for additional community benefits. For Tataskweyak Cree Nation specifically, the settlement provided funding for a 40-kilometer freshwater line from Assean Lake pictured above, as well as a new water treatment facility.

"Governments and industry should not try to undermine what our past leaders and elders worked so hard for to ensure that our future generations would have that right to clean drinking water that we fought for in the courts and won. We won that case because of the work that we did from this office with the people who we work with in this office and the council" Robert Spence, Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔦᕽ

Participants emphasized the importance of community-generated evidence in achieving legal success. The role of photographic documentation collected over time was noted as crucial evidence in the lawsuit proceedings. The following is an example of images used during the proceedings for the 2021 Safe Drinking Water for First Nations Class Action Settlement Agreement.

Figure 8: Photographic data showing fish and wildlife impacts,

Collected on the land by Robert Spence from TCN between September 25th and September 16th, 2019.

Participants expressed frustration with the restricted timeframe covered by the legal settlement, pointing to a longer span of impacts and living with said impacts.

> *"People were disappointed that we only went as far back as 2017 because of the fact that the waters, the issues with the water, had gone back decades, but the work to prove that anything was wrong with the water only just began in 2017 using Western science. Yeah, the western science that was not available to the previous chiefs and councils and other people working under the chiefs and councils at the time, and the funding that was not available to them." Robert Spence, Tataskweyak Cree Nation* ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔭᕽ

This response highlights the challenges faced by previous leadership in documenting water quality issues without access to formal scientific resources or funding. The settlement documentation confirms these temporal restrictions, stating:

> *"Importantly, in exchange for everything discussed above and as set forth in the Settlement, Class Members agree to release Canada in respect of any liability for failing to provide or fund the provision of safe drinking water on their reserves through the end of the Class Period." Federal Court of Canada, First Nations drinking water settlement agreement: Order and reasons, 2021.*

This statement limiting liability to a period shows the overall importance of having good decision-making procedures from now and moving forward.

5.4 Cultural sovereignty

There exists a gap in evaluating Cree Cultural activities, leading to inaccurate notions of hydro development on Cree lands as vehicles of modernity. Vague statements insinuating the lack of such deals show industrial proponents believe the development of the Keeyask dam will move the community forward. The following is an acknowledgement of the dangers of this thinking.

> *"And to assume that a traditional livelihood can be replaced by a modern job and modern services is very troublesome to make that assumption. Because what it does is it feeds into this idea that traditional livelihoods are inferior and modern livelihoods are*

superior, which is very problematic." Dr Buckland, October 8th, 2013, Keeyask Generation Project Public Hearing, Tataskweyak Cree Nation.

This mindset contributes to the imbalances discussed in the sections above. When being cross-examined about his valuations of a trapline, Dr. Kulchyski emphasized the value of an activity that has lasted centuries and will continue to do so, an important and often overlooked aspect.

> *"I don't believe the value of them have been weighed appropriately in this whole process. And that I think, in my view, a single trapline can have the same value as a single hydro dam. It will certainly last a lot longer, can last a lot longer. Hydro dams will eventually be decommissioned. And the culture of the people rests on their material action, on their practices, and a trapline is integral to those. And I think they have just been, to me, consistently underestimated through this whole process and through the previous processes. Dr. Peter Kulchyski, 6th January 2014, p6411 Keeyask Generation Project Public Hearing, Winnipeg.*

The question of cultural undervaluation is really a discussion on assimilation. Are the activities of Cree people so insignificant that they should prioritize dam-building activities? An unexpected question in the twentieth century, yet so cleverly cloaked. Luckily, this question on assimilation was thoroughly opposed during deliberations on the White Paper.

> *We have a section of the Constitution that says Aboriginal and Treaty rights are recognized and affirmed. And that means, you know, we had a huge battle about whether Aboriginal people should be assimilated into Canadian society. And a whole generation of Aboriginal leaders fought against that vision. They fought against the white paper; they fought for the entrenchment of Aboriginal rights in the Constitution. And what they were fighting for was the right to be different. And the right to be different for most of those people is grounded on the material practices associated with hunting. Dr. Peter Kulchyski, 6th January 2014, p6418 Keeyask Generation Project Public Hearing, Winnipeg.*

Here we see that cultural distinction is found in land practices. The unique ways in which these land-based activities are carried out are the definition of culture.

It's actually the children coming out of the hunting families who have sort of the cultural foundation and the vision to be able to exceed beyond a poor working-class lifestyle, where Manitoba Hydro basically wants to see people, and into making a contribution to the fabric of Canadian culture. So, if we get rid of the possibility of all of the hunting and all of the trapping families to exist in those communities, you know, we have condemned people to assimilation at the bottom end of our scale. Dr. Peter Kulchyski, 6th January 2014, p6419-6420 Keeyask Generation Project Public Hearing, Winnipeg.

This quote emphasises that land-based activities in themselves are meaningful and valuable to the Canadian economy, and more importantly, these actions are meaningful to themselves.

5.4.1 Those that will be, Youth

The practice of cultural sovereignty is deeply rooted in Indigenous worldviews emphasizing kinship with the natural world and responsibilities to future generations. Through this lens, we see the land and water as highly significant for Cree communities as sites for cultural continuity, sustenance, and identity. Members of the community articulate deep concerns about environmental degradation as concerning for current realities, but more importantly, as advocacy for future generations. This section looks at the preservation of natural resources through land and water stewardship, as well as resistance to ungoverned resource extraction as an intergenerational responsibility.

The historical and continuing destruction of river systems due to large-scale hydro development has left portions of nearby water systems, such as the Churchill River System and Nelson River Systems, entirely unusable in some sections. Participants emphasized the impacts of this degradation as detrimental to cultural practices dependent on clean water, healthy fish, and intact ecosystems. To prevent the same levels of degradation from occurring on the land, community members are adamant about highlighting the importance of preserving the land, anchoring its role as sustaining Cree people for millennia. Here, there is said to be a collective stance against unnecessary development, emphasizing that natural wealth should remain untouched, given the cost of resource extraction would be the degradation of cultural practices.

"There's a story here that there's gold here on the reserve already, but the elder said, 'Leave it there. We don't need it.' There's gold, just it's claimed by someone else, but we don't want to use it, or we're going to fight them if they ever try to take it out. We don't need it. The land is more important than those minerals that are there and whatever other mining." Mike Moose, Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔦᕽ

The priority alluded to is cultural preservation through ecological integrity rather than cultural degradation through mineral exploitation. This resolve places youth as future decision-makers, as they are being handed the decision to develop rather than the consequences of development. This is an opportunity for future generations to practice their self-determination. While decision-making was important, participants further stressed that this stance was also an important act of maintaining land and water resources for use by future generations.

"The purpose, we are standing here, is for our grandchildren. What are we going to leave for our grandchildren, more dams?" Ila Disbrowe, October 8th 2013, p27 Keeyask Generation Project Public Hearing, Tataskweyak Cree Nation

Placed between dams, the community is working to change its legacy for the sake of their youth. Similarly, leaders of the Stewardship Centre explained that the youth are their fuel to continue in this advocacy work despite the resulting emotional and physical tolls.

"This work that we're doing is not for us. It's tiring. It's exhausting, it's demoralizing. It's beyond comprehension what we have to go through day in and day out. But we have to pick ourselves up every day, every hour, every minute, every second, every week, every month, year after year after year to continue on, to ensure that what we're fighting for will be there for future generations." Robert Spence, Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔦᕽ

Here, it is seen that relentless effort is required to protect the environment for the youth. That even though the youth may not be aware of the ongoing work, the work is still important. A second leader, reflecting on the aforementioned Youth Gathering the previous day, connects the youth to the land and language, noting the decrease in Cree speaking among the youth; a significant marker of cultural identity.

“That's what I was thinking yesterday, cute little kids running around, all around like that. And all of them are speaking English, hardly any of them spoke a word of Cree.” Jonothan Kitchekeesik, Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔭᕽ

This underlines the connection between land and language preservation. Another leader of the Stewardship office explained the break in the cultural identity thread in the illustration below. Noting the residential school system as causing this gap, he emphasizes the importance of getting not only the youth out on the land during the various programming but also mentioning the importance that their parents go out on the land with them as well to learn and experience their culture on the land.

“Our fathers, our generation, showed us how to live off the land. But our children kind of missed, are kind of missing in this area [between 1990 and 2010]. Maybe a few that learn how to live after that. Then the Access Program, access agreement, came in around 2019 that's when we started taking children together. But the parents in this area [between 1990 and 2010] are missing. They're not teaching their children. So me him and him are in this era here, our fathers, our elders. This is where the big piece of that people continuing on the tradition are missing here, maybe just a few that are teaching their children now the now, the act first agreement came in, now we have a chance to continue teaching the children that want to go out on the land. ... There's a few, there's quite a few parents that don't know how to live off the land, but they want an open they're missing the lot knowledge from here. … There's other sorts of funding, like Jordan's principal. They do land base and the school, and our office, school, this office and Jordan's principal. And what did one family enhancement. I mean family enhancement. So there's, there's four entities that that are doing land-based programs.” Joseph Harvey, Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔭᕽ

The importance of continuous intergenerational learning is illustrated in this quote. It is established that land or water disruptions cause learning disruptions. The leaders of the Stewardship Centre are determined to continue with their effort to reestablish an unobstructed flow of cultural knowledge.

Figure 9: A Timeline of land-based practice interruptions.

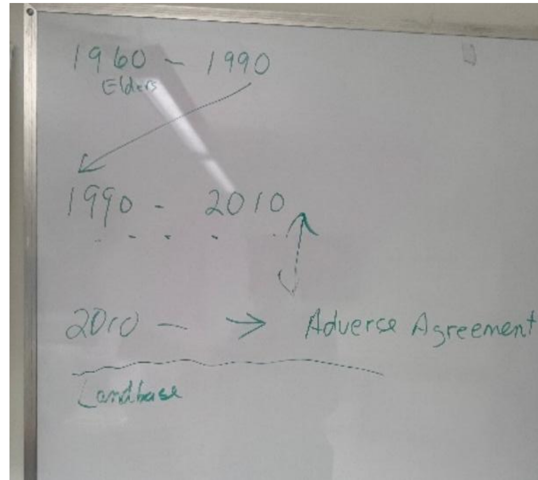

Image illustrated by Joseph Harvey at Stewardship Centre March 2025 in Tataskweyak Cree Nation.

Figure 10: A smoking teepee used for learning outside the land-based cabin at Chief Sam Cook Mahmuwee Education Centre

Photo taken on March 2025 by Bobbie Mangeli in Tataskweyak Cree Nation.

Other communities also continue to teach youth about cultural practices. An example is the Misipawistik Cree Nation impacted by the Grand Rapids Hydroelectric Dam. Here, a teacher holds an annual camp teaching youth various skills associated with being out on the land. Over the years, youth have learned, how to make sinew, how to make drums from hides, how to harvest birch bark to make canoes, how to prepare fish and berries among other skills. This resilience is key to cultural continuity.

Figure 11: Activities undertaken during culture camp. Youth stretching sinew. An elder demonstrating birch bark harvest.

Photos taken in July 2022 by Bobbie Mangeli in Misipawistik Cree Nation, another hydro-impacted community.

5.4.2 That which is greater, Spiritual

A crucial part of every interview was the link between the land and spiritual practices. With sites of ceremony being historically and experientially important markers. The quote below shows the land as a chronological link. This same place was a cultural site for ceremonies in pre-colonial times, and it remained so until the ceremonies were outlawed and later became where children were hidden from going to residential school, then became a church site, and is now back to being a sacred site. Such timelines show the connection between the land and something greater.

> *"So our people back then had to go to the east side of that limestone lake on the east side, northeast side of the lake, to have sweats. And there's people who still remember the stories of the that were handed down to our people, that remember why they had to hide the sweats and the ceremonies." Robert Spence, Tataskweyak Cree Nation* ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔦᕽ

Similarly, the case of Ila Disbrowe also reveals how the land was not simply a place to be flooded but an important part of their family's history. The place in question is the site at which her brother passed away by drowning; her father's island was named Leon's Island by the family, enforcing the links between the family and the island. According to a CBC article (2024), Leon Kitchekeesik fell through the ice on the Nelson River in 1980 when he was just seven years old.

His family, all members of Tataskweyak Cree Nation were never able to find his remains, so they set up a large cross memorial on an island in the river where they last saw him.

This meaningful connection drove Ila Disbrowe to halt the initial impoundment of the Keeeyask Dam. She did this by setting out on a boat the night before the planned impoundment date and camping on Leon's Island until the family was able to have one last gathering, a memorial on the island.

> *"Anyone who understands Cree culture would never say to a Cree person, just pack up and move on. That would degrade who we are because we are about the relation to our land. The land of the Creator gave to us to live on and to take care of it." Quoting Janet McIvor November 14th, 2013, p3815/6 Keeyask Generation Project Public Hearing, Tataskweyak Cree Nation*

This tie between the land and the people continues into the wellness of both.

> *"My soul hurts and is dying. I feel as though I'm mourning every day while being at the lake and the land. You can't understand that because you don't want to go past that door. And you can't. I like to see you try. I live the life, we live as First Nations people, being as connected to the water and the land as we are. You killed the land. You killed the water. You killed the fish. You killed the Indian. Ininiw." Robert Spence, Tataskweyak Cree Nation* ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔭᕽ

The connection with the land in itself is metaphysical to Cree peoples, but even more so when these lands are the final resting places of loved ones.

> *"That is why we always make our journey to that land, and we have that connection over there." Janet McIvor, October 8th, 2013, p24 Keeyask Generation Project Public Hearing, Tataskweyak Cree Nation*

5.4.3 Case Study: Robert Spence's Experience

As a marker of something greater, something more significant than yourself is being impacted.

“And in 1992, I had a dream of my grandfather and a little child. There was three of us standing there, holding hands. My grandfather spoke to me in that dream, and he said look at the little child. There was no place for him to play. That's the way it looks now in Split Lake with all the sharp rocks along the shoreline.” Jonothan K Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔭᕽ

Specifically asked me to share this experience. National Energy Board (NEB) hearings I will rewrite it as best as I remember, putting it in first person as it was told to me.

“I walked into that room where they were meeting at looked at the people sitting there. All of them. They looked strange, like creatures. So I started speaking, telling them off about everything about the water about the land, and the decisions they were making. I was in a trance and only realised it when someone tapped my shoulder and said “Enough Robert”. So I ran out of the room and went to the house. Melanie was in the kitchen when I got in and grabbed some bread. “Where are you going Robert.” “I’m going to pray”. So I went out on the land and set the bread at the tree when I heard thunder and it struck the top of my head, one… two… three. I looked up to see a cloud of dust on the other side of the lake, it was moving. And in the dust cloud I saw my mother and other people looking like the creatures in that room. I tried to call them but they were all looking in one direction walking. And I thought they are all walking into oblivion. The land is sick, the people are sick.” Story originally shared by in Thompson Manitoba by Robert Spence, Tataskweyak Cree Nation ᑕᑕᐢᑲᐧᔭᕽ

Ultimately, the spiritual experience shows the interconnectedness of all beings, a crucial aspect of consideration when proposing life-altering projects. Robert Spence leaves us with a poignant reminder. A remembrance that all things are kin, all are connected.

The land is the people, and the people are the land.

Chapter conclusion and implications

Colonial power structures are revealed in the approaches to hydroelectric development impact assessments. Compartmentalized rather than holistic approaches reflect systemic structures that exclude Indigenous voices from meaningful participation in decision-making processes

(Coulthard, 2014). In Manitoba, Canada, hydroelectric development is a highly politicized issue where legislative frameworks continue the infantilization of Indigenous peoples through paternalistic governance structures. Thus, consultation processes are forced to be sanitized into strictly empirical data, devoid of experiential data. Now attempting to reduce complex socio-ecological relationships to fragmented assessments, they fail to acknowledge interconnected Indigenous sovereignty and knowledge systems that view land, water, and community as entities (Simpson, 2017). Effective planning of hydroelectric development includes recognition of multi-faceted impacts, thereby being fully situated, determined, and governed by communities that may be affected by the development. This approach ensures minimal if any, political interference, maintaining the integrity of consultation processes.

The operations of unscrupulous environmental consultants in Canadian Indigenous communities reflect deeper systemic issues within colonial research practices. These are consultation cultures that foster extractive knowledge production over genuine community benefit (Smith, 2012). This culture thrives on the commodification of Indigenous knowledge. When this happens, community wisdom becomes classified as extracted data rather than respected Indigenous knowledge, and there is an equivalent loss of respect for knowledge holders. Additionally, this creates conditions for lateral violence as community members divide in competition for consultant or project benefits, undermining cultural community dynamics (Kimmerer 2013). On the contrary, truly decolonized consulting practices prioritize community self-determination and ensure that research and consultation processes serve community needs rather than external agendas (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012).

Communities across Canada are decolonizing, increasingly asserting inherent Indigenous authority, challenging colonial power structures that place Indigenous People as subjects of consultation (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). This shift reflects the restructuring of power imbalances within existing governance processes, placing communities in control rather than in a position of responding to imposed frameworks (Hayward et al., 2021). The dismantling of extractive relationships will have implications for the Indigenous-Crown/Federal relations, perhaps creating a future where legal and political frameworks for resource development are reassessed. Followed later by changes in the environmental assessments, specifically, Western research methodology.

Western research methodology is inherently hierarchical, often excluding community members from contributing meaningfully to upcoming projects. Making crucial decisions before engagement sessions, community members felt project plans were largely, if not fully, predetermined; thus, their contributions were not valued or needed. If the status quo is maintained, industries will have unfettered access to these lands, choosing not to consult properly with communities, thus breaking pre-existing laws that outline inherent Indigenous land rights.

Indigenous communities are challenging the hypocrisy of consultation, outing conventional research paradigms in order to reclaim authority over knowledge production in their territories and with their experiences. Going a step further to assert research sovereignty, i.e., not only asserting control over how research is conducted on their lands but also determining how findings are interpreted and applied in various decision-making processes.

In this vein, Tataskweyak Cree Nation has used community-derived data, i.e., photographs, as evidence of their longstanding observations in court. The need for admission of these photographs as credible sources undermines Indigenous lived experiences, placing Western-style data as superior. This is confirmed by Eckert et al. (2020) in highlighting the lack of full integration of Indigenous knowledge in federal environmental assessments in Canada. More recently, legislative reform such as the C-5 in Ontario, which is looking to 'Unleash" the economy (Ontario Legislative Assembly, 2023), has determined consultation to be a roadblock to development. Unfortunately for legislative bodies, such actions have the opposite of the intended effect, making consultation even slower due to fragmented relationships. They only go further to show that data must be owned and controlled by communities, that industry and governments cannot bypass communities in decision-making on community-allocated lands and waters. After all, Indigenous data sovereignty is foundational to self-determination and environmental governance (Taylor & Kukutai, 2016). Thus, ownership and control of data from now moving forward ensures that research and decision-making reflect Indigenous priorities and knowledge systems.

Similarly, there is a dissatisfaction with externally imposed timelines, especially where critical decision-making is needed. Among other things, these rushed deadlines undermine Indigenous self-governance by making the principle of free, prior, and informed consent unachievable

(Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). A solution for these rushed timelines is the community control over data collection and data management processes right from the assessment stage. Keeping communities aligned with all processes from the beginning supports self-determination. A sharp contrast with extractive research models that prioritize external timelines over community needs (Kimmerer, 2013). This suggests that meaningful consultation is built on the pillars of Indigenous control over data ownership, data self-interpretation, and determination of engagement timelines. A stark difference from current models that do not reflect cultural considerations, models that push for assimilation on Indigenous lands.

The equation of development with modernity, however false, is a reflection of existing colonial narratives. Moving even further to imply assimilation as profitable, positioning Indigenous ways of life as obstacles to progress. Peculiar, as substantial evidence shows that this method of "development" often results in cultural and environmental regression rather than advancement (Smith, 2012). There is then a disconnect between promises of associated modernity and lived realities. This chasm highlights the complete misunderstanding of Indigenous valuation systems, both physical and spiritual. Institutional frameworks do not account for metaphysical connections with land. These Cree values and practices that are "crucial to the continuation of ceremony" cannot be quantified through Western epistemological frameworks (Wilson, 2008). How can you quantify the unquantifiable? This is an almost insurmountable challenge for solely empirical research frameworks. A paradigm shift is required to navigate this reality. There needs to be an acknowledgment of spiritual land relationships that transcend Western legal and economic frameworks, an agreement to restructure the control dynamic. Given that all things begin and are dictated by ceremony, researchers can now appreciate the need for governance and sovereignty in environmental assessments, project planning, project implementation, and project running.

It is important to note that the issues of sovereignty mentioned in this data chapter are applicable beyond hydroelectric development, especially at this time, the province is pushing for mining-related development. These data apply to land-use policy generation and implementation. The resistance to development is not a rejection of modernity; rather, it is an opportunity to create a framework of environmental justice and sovereignty, ensuring that future generations inherit landscapes that remain viable for unbroken cultural practices and ecological balance.

Chapter 6: Thesis Conclusion

In September of 2021, I set out to write a thesis based on conservation, highlighting all the ways in which hydro-development had impacted various species. I wanted to document these species changes and the ways in which community-based practices could be integrated into restoration efforts. I had set out on a traditional extraction method of research. I had a plan and the ways I would present the data; I could almost see the end even before I began. I was on the wrong path. Coronavirus halted me in my path. I could not visit the communities or carry out my research as I had planned; everything was shut down. Tataskweyak Cree Nation and other communities had more important duties to attend to, keeping the community members safe. I took classes during this break and had some time to reflect on my research plans. When I was finally able to visit TCN and SIL in October, I learned two things. 1. I had greatly oversimplified the subject of conservation. 2. As much as the initial proposal was from a community member, this research had morphed into being MY research, a selfish undertaking.

Throughout the interviews in the previous chapters, we see that the topic that matters most to everyone interviewed is the people. Interviewees expressed a long-standing lack of appreciation for researchers who cared more about the environment than the people living in these same environments. They also spoke of little effort being put towards learning about the community, and no effort being put towards handing back research findings. "Where is our copy?" was the first thing I heard Mike Moose speak, referring to a researcher whom he had not heard from after their studies were completed. "I won't speak with you" was the last thing I heard directly from Jonothan Kitchekeesik before a three-year silence. After proving that there was goodwill, reciprocity, and a commitment on my end, Jonothan Kitchekeesik was willing to help, becoming fundamental to the second research data chapter. "We've brought Bobbie here so she can do a good job on her paper".

All this points toward an important subtext: community members are tired of being surveilled and were finally speaking to it. The era of extraction research at TCN was over. Active research approaches rooted in Cree values are necessary. Through Cree values, we learn Wisdom, Love, Respect, Bravery, Honesty, Humility, and Truth. In active research, we learn observation, collaboration, adaptation and reflection all while tailoring methods to the work at hand. The merging of these centers people, causing a refining of methods. It makes one humble. I had to

decolonise myself before I could decolonize my work. I remembered the similar values I was taught by my family as a child. One of them being you have two eyes and two ears and only one mouth, watch more, listen more and talk less. A crucial lesson to centre those around you rather than yourself. While being neither Indigenous nor Canadian gave me the perspective to view things subjectively, I noted bridges such as that between cultures.

Another bridge was the application of sovereignty. It was of note that the word sovereignty itself was not used by interviewees, yet the description of sovereignty was outlined so clearly. There may be several reasons as to why this was not the case, but the most important one would be that the actions reflect a way of life and not a theoretical concept. Meaning, people often do not specially frame aspects of life that are inherent to themselves.

Most years, Wa Ni Ska Tan hosts a hydro tour. This is a visit to various hydro communities that have been greatly impacted by hydro development. These communities include Grand Rapids, Cross Lake, Norway House, Split Lake, South Indian Lake, Nelson House. It was during the hydro tour of 2019, that I had a conversation that altered my thinking. Parked at Notigi for a group break, I had brief discussion with Dr. Kulchyski about my home and the current events. I described that we had been informed that there would be a dam built, and it would affect our land, I explained that we were preparing for the government surveyors to come and value our land. That there would be no negotiations but whatever they would allocate would be the amounts that we would receive. A few months later as the compensation cheques would being handed out, I would discover that the bulk of the compensation was based on the value of the cash crops planted on the land, assigning no value to the trees and other features native to the land. During that conversation, it dawned on me that I too was hydro-impacted. This changed the way I saw things instantly.

I pondered on the compensation process, specifically the displacement of a poor farmer and his family who lived at the bottom of Got Alila, the hill we occupy. I was a youth when all these proceedings were occurring. Where my family felt powerless to change the situation, as a youth, I felt even more powerless in the face of the government. What were the differences between these power dynamics in my home country and in Canada? It seemed to me that there were no differences, despite Kenya being a "third world country", or "developing nation" in diplomatic circles. Additionally, I realized that the compensation process was attempting to sterilizing one of

the oldest human rituals, burial. How will you put a price on a resting place? How could you put a price on a resting place? A real concern given my maternal grandparents rest not too far from the dam site being built. I realized that being hydro-impacted was not a niche experience of injustice in Northern Manitoba, but a global issue of displacement, altering many lives and leaving voices unheard. This work became closer to my heart and more difficult to do as it was touching home, literally.

A few years later, I had an opportunity to work with a consulting company. Contrary to predatory consultants mentioned in the previous chapters, this company was determined to do things in the right way. As soon as I joined, I learned that the clients we were working with were as a result of relationships built and maintained over the years by the founders, and now with various project leads. I learned that the tasks we were undertaking were varied as they expressed community interests and objectives rather than pre-determined outcomes. This approach to consulting was so integrated in community values that they included ceremony as part of impact assessment reports. That was the first time I saw that. At this company, I saw positionality applied properly as a way to bridge connections rather than to evade responsibilities.

The company continues to learn, but it does so walking in the right path. Similarly, emerging Indigenous-owned consulting firms are determined to change the status quo of operations to work in good ways within their own communities. A cautionary congratulations is due to these firms, knowing that the issues surrounding predatory consulting are both systemic and individual. Firms would need to be vigilant and intentional so that they do not slip into familiar routines, even if it is at their own expense. Further, the understandings that work need to be localized as outcomes are local should cause the emergence of nation-led consulting firms to address territorial impacts from various resource extractions. This local approach is very critical at a time when the Canadian government is keen on rolling out resource extraction projects. The lag time for new companies to understand the contexts for decision-making in specific areas is too great a cost to pay. It is my recommendation that in this political landscape, Elders, Community Leadership, Youth and Specified Land Users take the helm in ultimate negotiation proceedings.

Having attended the National Energy Hearing Board for the Manitoba-Minnesota Transmission Powerline and Manitoba Hydro Appeals on the Public Utilities Board Special Rates for On-

Reserve First Nations Customers, I can say that there is a lot for these special groups to handle. Opportunities to discuss Bill C5, the One Canadian Economy, and recent Mining decisions in Northern Manitoba are one such place. The future for inclusion and ultimate practices of sovereignty are hopeful but again require caution. A beam of this light can be seen in the recent appointments for the Clean Environment Commission Board. The board consists of individuals who have witnessed hydro development impacts, even authoring books on the same. The board is diverse in gender and ethnicity, hopefully a marker of perspective shifts. These are some optimisms, albeit we must approach them cautiously, given the history of the institution.

Ultimately, Canada is built on a resource extraction economy. As her economy continues to grow, she should critically think about the approaches to research extraction. As more information on the right approaches in impact assessments and resource extraction continues to emerge, the hope is that more nuanced discussions on research extraction will be fostered. Parallel to these conversations, Indigenous communities should continue exercising their sovereignty in different ways across the land. Some recommendations from this work's findings include considerations for future resource extraction. With the guidance of the original Keepers of the land, Political involvement, project scale, policy implementation, and the true spirit of collaboration need to be assessed and agreed upon.

Not only is it attainable to make decisions based on the impacts to cultures and people when looking into hydro development and other resource projects, but it is also the right thing to do.

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