



WA NI SKA TAN

AN ALLIANCE OF HYDRO IMPACTED COMMUNITIES

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We are a group of academics and First Nations' members who have spent years documenting the adverse impacts of hydroelectric projects on Manitoba First Nations. We work collectively through a community-academic research partnership called Wa Ni Ska Tan: An Alliance of Hydro Impacted Communities, whose membership includes researchers, academics, hydro-affected community members, concerned citizens, and members of the NGO community in Manitoba. Some of our members are also Treaty rights holders with constitutionally-affirmed and protected rights. For the last seven years we have been documenting the impacts of hydro power on First Nation communities, land, water, and livelihoods with the goal of increasing awareness of the impacts of hydroelectric projects among the general public and fostering social/environmental change.

Indigenous Peoples in Northern Manitoba have long experienced profound adverse impacts from hydro operations and practices. These impacts have occurred across the full spectrum of human experience – in economic, social, and cultural life; health and well-being; safety and security; and the family. Moreover, the combined effects of hydropower and climate crisis intersect with other issues that confront Indigenous communities as a result of colonization, including gendered violence, substance abuse, and the long-term and intergenerational effects of residential schools. These experiences of colonial violence continue to wreak havoc on the social and cultural fabric of Indigenous communities in Manitoba, contributing to widespread cultural loss and resulting in ongoing vulnerabilities that affect community social structures and relationships.

Commercial fisheries at O-Pipon-Na-Piwin (South Indian Lake), Misipawistik (Grand Rapids), and Tataskweyak (Split Lake) were virtually destroyed by dams and water level manipulations; in other communities, they were severely damaged. [1] The jobs that disappeared were largely men's jobs, but women shared the burden of finding ways to feed and care for families deprived of a steady, independent source of income. Forests were submerged or clearcut, traplines drowned, wetlands and rapids flooded and erased. Many once-pristine lakes and rivers became silted and contaminated, creating a drinking water crisis. As the waterways filled with debris, dead trees, mud from slumping shorelines, and old construction equipment, travel became hazardous and sometimes deadly. Virtually all aspects of Indigenous community and family life have been harmed and restricted by these changes; the life on the land that was always the foundation of Indigenous lifeways has become nearly impossible. Surrounded by dirty water, flooded forests, collapsing shorelines, and vanished beaches, communities have lost the unspoiled beauty that elders knew as children. Most people spend less time on the land and water, partly for cost and safety reasons and partly because it is heartbreaking to see the destruction of beloved, fruitful, and sacred places. [2] Youth were left with nothing to do, little access to traditional ways and practices, and reduced prospects; adults lost their livelihoods, their food security, their ability to practice their culture easily, and sometimes their sense of purpose. The young people feel their elders' grief, but many do not understand the deep loss that lies behind it. The people have carried on with courage and have spoken out for years about hydro damages; but the harm continues unabated.

In recent years, some community members have begun to disclose the violent realities they have experienced due to the presence of largely-male work forces at construction site “man camps” and hydro installations. Some of the workers at these sites have victimized local members of northern First Nations via acts of rape, sexual assault, physical assault, sexual harassment, racism, and other forms of discrimination and abuse. The Clean Environment Commission heard testimony from First Nation residents about these kinds of incidents and documented them within the Regional Cumulative Effects Assessment, which was referred to the RCMP in 2018 [3] – but to our knowledge no progress has been made public. It is clear that the public disclosures to date are only the tip of the iceberg, that violence connected to hydro development is well known in communities, as attested by many comments from community members and leaders after the report’s publication. [4] York Factory First Nation, Tataskweyak Cree Nation, War Lake First Nation, and Fox Lake Cree Nation have all called for a public inquiry into these abuses.

The recent final report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls has also called for a public inquiry into Manitoba Hydro's projects through their Calls for Justice for Extractive and Development Industries (13.4, Page 196):

“We call upon the federal, provincial, and territorial governments to fund further inquiries and studies in order to better understand the relationship between resource extraction and other development projects and violence against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQA people. At a minimum, we support the call of Indigenous women and leaders for a public inquiry into the **sexual violence and racism at hydroelectric projects in northern Manitoba.**” [emphasis added]

We support this call for a full public inquiry into northern Manitoba hydroelectric projects, including a cumulative effects assessment of the whole integrated Manitoba Hydro system for all impacted communities, and also a public inquiry into the gendered violence associated with historic and contemporary “man camps” and construction sites. We recommend that the Government of Canada create and fund both these initiatives.

Sincerely,

Dr. Ramona Neckoway and Dr. Jarvis Brownlie - on behalf of the Gendered Impacts Committee

References:

[1] See, for instance, Steve Ducharme, “Death of a Fishery,” at

<https://hydrojustice.org/2016/04/15/death-of-a-fishery/> and “Gerald McKay’s Life in Grand Rapids,” at <https://hydroimpacted.ca/community-stories/>.

[2] Glen Dawkins, 2019, “Northern First Nations chiefs make pitch to UN on Hydro”, Winnipeg Sun, <https://winnipeg.sun.com/news/news-news/northern-first-nations-chiefs-make-pitch-to-un-on-hydro>

[3] CBC News, 2018, Allegations of sexual abuse, racism revealed in report on hydro projects' impact in northern Manitoba. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/abuse-racism-report-hydro-1.4793749>

[4] See, e.g., “‘I seen women raped:’ Report alleges hydro development led to abuse in Manitoba,” APTN News, Aug. 22, 2018; Donna Carreiro, “Cree grandmother recalls abuse described in shocking report on Manitoba Hydro workers,” CBC News, Aug. 24, 2018.