

“What you do to Eeyou Istchee (our land), you do to Eeyouch (our people)”

The Nishiiyuu Council of Elders stands with the Cree Nation in its strong opposition to uranium development in our territory, Eeyou Istchee.

“The Creator gave me a beautiful garden to watch and maintain. I was told to take from it only what I needed to survive. The Creator has also given the white man his own garden to watch and maintain. The white man came and destroyed the garden I was told to care for. How would the white man feel if we had gone and destroyed his garden? What would happen to us? We'd be put into jail and called criminals. So ask yourself who has committed the crime?”

- *Chisasibi elder*, speaking about the La Grande Hydroelectric Project

WHO WE ARE

In Cree society, Elders are the keepers of this Cree history, and of traditional knowledge and wisdom, values, customs and teachings. We are the guardians of Cree language, culture, prophecies and legends. We are the teachers of Cree philosophies, traditional healing and medicines. We make sure that the Cree way of life is maintained and passed down through generations. Elders play a respected and highly valued role in Cree society.

The Nishiiyuu Council of Elders assists the Cree Elders to fulfill their important role in Cree society. The experience and knowledge of Cree Elders benefit the entire Cree Nation. Respect for the wisdom and knowledge of the Elders is essential to the Nation's continued health and strength.

In Cree, *Nishiiyuu* basically means “human being” or “the people”. The term *Nishiiyuu* also has other deeper meanings, including the interconnectedness of all life and of present generations to future generations. It is the Cree Elders' duty to pass on the traditional and spiritual teachings that are part of the Cree way of life, the *Nishiiyuu* way, to the younger generations. We believe that the strength of our culture can be measured by the value placed on our Elders and by the connection between Youth and Elders.

There are those who say our land, Eeyou Istchee, is empty and can therefore be developed and stripped of its resources without harming anyone or anything. Those people do not know Eeyou Istchee. It is not empty. Our ancestors have walked and paddled its length and breadth to survive off the land for many millennia. As a map of Cree traplines will show, we continue to occupy and use all of this land to this day.

308 P NP MEM26

Les enjeux de la filière uranifère au Québec

6211-08-012

This land has always been sacred to the Cree. Our deep connection to it sustains and grounds our culture and way of life. It is woven through our legends. It is the basis of our traditional knowledge and medicines. This land has sustained us for many thousands of years, long before the arrival of Europeans to this continent. It provided us with shelter, sustenance, warmth, clothing and physical and spiritual medicine. Just as a mother protects and nurtures her children, so did the land protect and nurture the people and it is for this reason that the indigenous people refer to her as "Mother Earth". In turn, we must respect and protect the land. The animals and birds have given themselves to us, to keep our people alive. Now, we must speak up to protect them.

There is an old Cree saying that gives an indication of how important the land is to the people: "We do not own the land. We are borrowing it from our children and we must take care of it and leave it in the same, if not better, condition than when we inherited it." Non-natives write wills to distribute their wealth, but the only wealth that Crees can pass on is the land. We decide who will take over caring for the land when we pass on. The land is transferred from one generation to the next. This is one of the messages that the Elders must pass down to the younger generations.

When our communities are confronted with an important issue or decision, we believe that we must look back to see where we have come from and to learn from our past. Only in this way can we properly understand where we are going. Our choices for tomorrow must ensure that this connection between the past and the present is maintained. Our choices must also ensure that our connection to the land is maintained, because the land is our classroom; it teaches us everything. Through the land and its lessons, we are connected to the Creator.

The Elders' teachings emphasize that we must make choices for our future that will preserve this land, our spiritual homeland, on which we have survived for thousands of years, and on which our lives, our culture and our identity as Crees of Eeyou Istchee depend. These choices may include the continued development of our territory. Indeed, we are not opposed to real, rational and sustainable development, which is compatible with the Cree way of life. But any development on our land must not put us in danger or increase the negative impacts on our way of life and our traditional practices. Our choices must ensure that the land will still be there, in good health, for our future generations.

For these reasons, we do not and cannot support uranium development in Eeyou Istchee in good conscience. The Nishiiyuu Council of Elders stands together with all Crees in opposing uranium development on our land. In the face of such a great threat to the Cree way of life, we cannot remain silent. We must speak out for those future generations who cannot speak for themselves. Because what is done to our land, is done to our people.

WHY WE STAND AGAINST URANIUM

Our opposition to uranium activities in Eeyou Istchee is rooted in our experience with development in our territory. As recently as forty years ago, when resources were discovered on aboriginal lands, there was no consultation with the people. They were expected to accommodate and adapt to changes to their lands and lives. Development proceeded with little or no mitigation of the destruction of the land, the culture, the health and the economy of the people.

The Cree faced this with the James Bay Hydroelectric project of the 1970s. When the developers were forced to consult with the Cree and the Inuit before proceeding with the project, many promises were made. These promises were being broken before the ink was even dry on the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (JBNQA). Assurances that there would be no negative impacts from the project turned out to be false.

The story of the community of Chisasibi, which the BAPE had the opportunity to visit during its hearings, provides a powerful example of this experience.

Until the mid-twentieth century – mere generations ago – we Crees were primarily nomadic. We lived on and used our family hunting territories and traplines throughout the entire territory of Eeyou Istchee. The Crees of the Great River (Chisasibi, as it is called in Cree, or the La Grande River, as it is also known) used the island of Fort George at the mouth of the river for summertime assemblies. Eventually, a Cree settlement was established on the island.

During this time, and for centuries before, the Chisasibi Crees depended heavily on the whitefish that spawned below the First Rapids on the La Grande River, upstream from the island of Fort George. The First Rapids, Upichuun, were not only fundamental to our survival, but also developed an immense spiritual significance to us. Every summer, the coastal and inland Crees would meet at Upichuun, to fish together at the rapids.

Then the Quebec Government dreamed up the James Bay Hydroelectric project on the La Grande River. This project required the flooding of thousands of square kilometres of our lands. Rivers were to be diverted, and reservoirs and dams built. We were told that the natural narrowing and drop in height of the river at Upichuun made it an ideal place to build a power station. The LG1 dam would destroy the rapids at Upichuun.

Planning and construction of the project began without even talking to us, but we fought hard for negotiations. One of our first demands was that the LG1 dam be moved further upriver, away from its proposed site at Upichuun. We wanted to preserve this site and continue fishing there. But potential impacts of the project forced the Crees of Fort George to relocate. The developers insisted that the LG1 site be at Upichuun. And so, the government kept the LG1 site where it was, and moved the community instead.

The Crees of Fort George compromised, and moved their community to where it is today, in the new community of Chisasibi on the left bank of the La Grande river. The Government made certain promises in return for these compromises. We were told not to worry about our land, that things would remain the same and that fishing could continue at Upichuun. But this is not the case.

Today those rapids have disappeared beneath the LG1 dam. The sloping rocks on which generations of our people camped and fished are now gone. Since the flooding, there is no more fishing at the LG1 site, and the river is no longer the same Great River we once knew. Its banks have eroded and are now too steep for fishing. The river is faster and it no longer freezes as it once did. We can no longer go out onto the ice at Black Island to set our fish nets under the ice in the fall. The quality of the fish in the river is not the same. Because of the La Grande Dam, our younger generations from the inland and the coast will never have the chance to meet at Upichuun to fish for whitefish on those rapids, or at Black Island to set nets.

Today, we are again being promised certain things by the government and developers about proposed uranium mining on our land. We are being told not to worry about the risks posed by uranium activities, because the mining companies have everything under control and the government will take care of us. We are told that the government would never allow uranium development to move ahead unless the proposed activities were "safe". Our experience teaches us to be wary of such promises.

Our decision to oppose uranium activities in Eeyou Istchee has been made. It is based both on our experience with development in Eeyou Istchee and on short term and long term concerns.

In the short term, we are afraid that our Eeyou way of life will be further affected if uranium development is allowed in Eeyou Istchee. In the wake of the hydroelectric project, we can no longer fish on the river as we once did. We are also told that the fish from the Great River, a staple of the Cree diet, has been contaminated with mercury and can be toxic to us. Many Cree who were directly impacted by the project were tested and found to have unacceptable levels of mercury in their systems. For years we have depended upon the land as a means of survival. In Cree society, fish completes the circle of our existence: it is the first solid food that Cree babies eat and the last that Cree Elders eat. Yet today we are told not to eat the fish that we have lived off for years. The changing river and the mercury in fish has had devastating effects on our traditions. Setting up gill nets was the first thing that Crees would do when we got out on the land in the spring, before hunting for other sustenance. On the new river, and with the mercury concerns, we are less inclined to do that. The result is that our people do not fish as much, and most Youth do not know how to make or tend nets.

A study conducted by researchers from the Faculty of Medicine and the Institute of Nutrition and Functional Foods at Laval University, recently published in the *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, stated that according to the analysis done by the researchers, 47% of the adult James Bay Cree population have high C-reactive

problems (CRP). The risk for coronary heart disease is 1.5 to 2 times higher for people who have a high CRP level. One of the observations of the study was that we Crees consume much less omega-3 than the Inuit, and this may make us more susceptible to heart disease. One of the effects of development is that we are now eating less fish. And we are less healthy because of this.

We have also heard that when the caribou eat lichen that has been exposed to radioactive products from uranium mines, this radioactivity passes into their bodies and accumulates. When we then consume the caribou meat, we would be exposed to this radioactivity. We also ingest this lichen directly, when we make a traditional soup with the blood and the caribou's stomach contents. If uranium mining is allowed on Eeyou Istchee, will we soon be told that we can no longer eat the caribou meat on which we depend, because it is toxic to us? What if something disastrous should happen to the caribou herds as a result of uranium mining? Will people stop hunting caribou the way they have stopped fishing? We depend not only on caribou meat, but also on the hide for clothing, the sinew for snow shoe laces, etc. Will this important tradition be lost as well? Who can blame the Cree for trying to protect not just our land and its resources, but also its plant and animal resources, and our traditions?

We Elders have witnessed incredible changes in our territory over our lifetimes. The Eeyouch have felt many of the cumulative effects of development in Eeyou Istchee. Most of us were born on our families' traplines on the land, many of us were sent away to residential schools, and some of us were youth when the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement was signed in 1975. Although our people are now based in established communities, we continue to spend long periods out on the land, in our camps. We still harvest our own food and practice traditional activities. Yet the way we use the land has changed. For instance, people who live on the land used to return to the communities in the spring to give the land time to rest, and for the young birds and animals to grow. Now, the land has been opened up for sports hunting and fishing, and it is not given this time to rest. This also means that the Cree can no longer live out on the land in peace, and less people go out on the land.

We are also dealing with many health concerns that we did not face before, such as rising rates of cancer, obesity and diabetes. Our communities are experiencing many social problems, and we face the challenge of passing on our traditional practices to our youth in this increasingly modern and open world. Our people are worried, from witnessing so many changes on their land. We cannot help but think that some of these health problems are connected to this constant stress.

We have witnessed these changes over a period of less than one hundred years. Yet we are told that uranium tailings will remain dangerous for hundreds of thousands of years. In light of the changes we have witnessed on our lands and lives in our short lifetimes, we cannot begin to imagine what changes will take place over the hundreds of thousands of years that this waste will have to be managed.

We Elders know and use the very land that the mining companies propose to use for uranium mining activities. The mining companies say that this land is empty, but we know otherwise. We Cree do not build monuments. It is Cree practice to leave no signs when we are on the land. But just because nobody can see that we have been somewhere, does not mean that we are not there. We live in, use and know every part of Eeyou Istchee. Yet the people who will be deciding the fate of this land are far removed from it – they do not know it.

Governments can claim that the risks of uranium mining are minimal and if something unforeseen should happen, it can promise to impose mitigating measures on the developer. But if something unforeseen does happen, it will already be too late to protect the people and the animals on which we depend. Why would we trust these people who tell us, again, that we do not need to worry, that we will be taken care of? We have heard this before! The government cannot predict what will happen on land it does not know, no more than we could have predicted what happened to us over the last one hundred years. When everything is measured in dollars and cents, the Elders are asking: What is the life of a Cree, or the animals upon which we depend, worth? The government may say it can compensate us if something goes wrong with uranium mining and remediate the land, but if it leads to the loss of Cree life, that cannot be compensated or remediated.

In 1975, when the JBNQA was signed and we ourselves were youth, the Government explained to us that its negotiations were based on two guiding principles. The first principle was that Quebec wishes to develop and use the natural resources of its territory for the benefit of all its people. The second principle was that the needs and choices of the Crees would be recognized and respected, including the Cree culture and way of life that are different from those of other peoples of Quebec.

To us, this agreement is a social contract. In it, we Crees agreed to share the wealth of our territory for the benefit of the province, in a manner that respects our unique needs and choices.

We, the Elders of Eeyou Istchee, wish to tell the BAPE and the Government of Quebec that if this social contract is to be honoured, and our unique needs are to be respected, then we cannot host uranium activities on our territory. The Crees are not anti-development. By assenting to the James Bay Hydroelectric project, we enabled the development of energy for Quebec and the United States. By signing the JBNQA we agreed to rational, sustainable development, that has positive effects for everyone. But uranium development cannot be rational or sustainable. The Crees agreed to make compromises for development, but there is no evidence of the compromises that developers are making. And we will not compromise our values to allow uranium development on our land. We choose to live lives in which, according to the philosophy of the JBNQA, our unique needs are respected, and we continue to take care of ourselves. We choose to live in such a way that respects our culture, traditions and way of life. We choose to live in such a way that respects the land, and that respects both past and future generations.

This is why the Elders of Eeyou Istchee do not and cannot support uranium mining. We cannot and will not agree to development that imposes unknown and unknowable risks on our land and our future generations, essentially in perpetuity.

Instead, we choose to stand, united, against uranium extraction in Eeyou Istchee.

Because what you do to Eeyou Istchee, you do to Eeyouch.