A Sad Sort of Clean

Hydropower in Northern Manitoba

Manitobans are plugged into a huge northern hydropower system. Our TV's, toasters and indeed our daily lives depend on the electricity produced by remote dams. But at the far end of the transmission lines lies a reality few of us ever see.

Over the past half century, Manitoba Hydro has re-engineered the province's two largest rivers, three of its five largest lakes and many smaller bodies of water. The result at the southern end of the transmission line is reliable, inexpensive, low-carbon energy for customers here and in the U.S. The result in the north is more complicated.

While five First Nations have joined Manitoba Hydro's push to expand the northern system, the wounds from the existing project—both on the land and in people's hearts—remain a defining feature of northern Manitoba.

Some of the damage has been healed by time, by the Hydro-First Nations partnerships and by the \$948 million the company has spent on compensation and mitigation over the past 50 years, but much has not.

Winnipeg photographer Matthew Sawatzky and Elder Ellen Cook of the Misipawistik Cree Nation travelled north in the fall of 2012 to document part of the troubling and seldom-reported reality at the northern end of the transmission line.

The images and words they brought back are of particular consequence now, as Manitoba Hydro pushes to expand its northern generating system with the proposed Keeyask and Conawapa dams.

This project was commissioned by the Interchurch Council on Hydropower and funded by St. Stephen's-Broadway Foundation.



1) Lines

"Our daily lives depend on electricity. But at the far end of the transmission lines that link our toasters and TVs to a huge hydropower system in northern Manitoba lies a reality few of us ever see."



3) Reservoir

The spillway of the Grand Rapids Dam holds back a 30-metre high wall of water in Cedar Lake (left). Completed in 1968, Manitoba's fourth largest dam contains 200,000 tonnes of concrete and can produce as much power as 145 locomotives, or eight times the power needed to propel the world's largest cruise ship.



2) Cedar Lake

Manitoba Hydro's dams permanently flood over 260,000 hectares of land—one-and-a-half times the area inundated during the "Flood of the Century"—including 115,000 hectares at Cedar Lake. Areas used by Aboriginal communities for hunting, trapping, berry-picking and camping for many generations are under water.



4) Debris

Elder Herb Cook of the Misipawistik Cree Nation (Grand Rapids) surveys wood debris littering Cedar Lake. As shorelines erode, trees fall into the lake, accumulating over the years. This debris makes shore access difficult both for people and animals.



5) A Grand Loss

The old bed of the Saskatchewan River lies dry where the Grand Rapids flowed before water was re-routed through the dam. Misipawistik Cree Nation was named after these rapids. Misipawistik translates as Grand Rapids.



7) Erosion

An Aboriginal trapper's cabin sits abandoned due to ever-advancing shoreline erosion on Split Lake. The lake is a widening of Manitoba's largest river, the Nelson, just upstream of Manitoba Hydro's three largest dams and immediately downstream of another. Untold hectares of boreal forest erode into hydro-affected waterways each year.



6) Left Behind

"Most people here . . . all they want is for Manitoba Hydro to clean up the mess it left behind." – Stella Neff, elder, Misipawistik Cree Nation



8) Fluctuation

Hydro operations create unnatural water level fluctuations that destabilize hundreds of kilometres of shoreline, including this point on Split Lake. When water rises, erosion occurs; when water drops, debris-strewn shoreline lies exposed.



9) 'Clean Energy'

"Manitoba Hydro sells power produced in our territory as clean, renewable energy—it isn't." – Alberteen Spence (right), social worker, Tataskweyak Cree Nation (Split Lake), pictured with Ellen Cook



11) Appetite

"I can't stand it." – Robert Spence, referring to the fact that the waterways he loves and depends on are used to fuel the American appetite for energy



10) Mist and Megawatts

Fisherman Robert Spence of the Tataskweyak Cree Nation prepares for a day on the water while residents of the American Upper Midwest use power produced by the same water to brew their morning coffee and power-up their computers. Approximately one-third of the hydropower produced in Manitoba is exported.



12) Sadness

"I'm sorry my kids didn't get to see Split Lake the way it used to be. . . . They'll never see it." – Robert Spence, pictured with helper Lionel Flett



13) The Past is Present

An island suffering the effects of unnatural water fluctuations serves as a stop-off during a day of fishing. "It eats away at you," he says of fishing in a damaged environment.

Though hydro construction peaked in the 1970s, and most dams are at least 30 years old, for Robert Spence, the "past" harm to which Manitoba Hydro sometimes refers, is a present reality.



14) Memories

Tataskweyak elder Christine Garson holds a picture of her late husband Noah—who was a highly knowledgeable trapper, hunter and fisherman—paddling in his people's homeland.



15) Sacred

The Creator encircles the natural world with wonder. When rivers are dammed and lakes altered, this sacredness is compromised.

The beaver lodge on this island sits stranded above the waterline after the level of Split Lake dropped. In a natural state, seasonal water level changes orchestrate the delicate shoreline ecosystem, sending key signals to various life forms. Hydro operations disrupt this.



16) Responsibility

Though some shorelines re-stabilize, collapsing banks are typical of hydro-affected waterways.

"Manitoba Hydro incorporates environmentally responsible practices into all aspects of our business." —Manitoba Hydro Annual Report, 2012



18) Abundance of the North

Manitoba's northern hydropower system produces over \$3.5 million worth of energy on an average day. Exports of hydropower have brought \$5.2 billion into the province in the last decade. Yet many Cree people in Split Lake and other affected communities have not been able to share in the abundance.



17) Benefits

"[The Manitoba Hydro officials] put a big paper down and on it is was pie, a big pie. It was cut into pieces. I looked at it. . . . There was a very small piece for us, a tiny piece for us, and big pieces for them. "I don't want this pie,' I told them. . . . 'You are cheating us." – Betsy Flett, elder Tataskweyak Cree Nation



19) Homeland

"The land looks strange now.... It doesn't look at all like it did in the past. It is falling into the lake." – William Spence, elder, O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation (South Indian Lake)

A Sad Sort of Clean - Gallery Walk

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