Exploring Diversified Strategies for Co-operative Management of Forests by a First Nation and the Province of Alberta

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Abstract

While the boreal forests in northern Alberta have rich natural resources, which assure economic development for regional and provincial finances, for Aboriginal people living there, the forests have played a pivotal role in continuing their traditional subsistence based on hunting and gathering. In Canada, about eighty percent of Aboriginal people live in the forested area; and therefore, forests are indispensable for sustaining Aboriginal cultures and societies. Among First Nations in northern Alberta, the Little Red River Cree Nation (LRRCN) was the first to begin the management of their boreal forests in the form of co-operation with governments and the forestry sector. With this, the Nation has gained a timber harvest permit and runs a forestry operation along with private forest companies within their traditional territories. Aboriginal participation into the global capitalist economy will be a means to create job opportunities within the community, to regain control over their traditional relationship with the land, to contribute to conserve the ecological integrity of the forests, and ultimately to sustain the community as such. However, researches to this date reveal problems that industrial forestry can be incongruent with Aboriginal uses of the forest and sustainability of the forests. High Conservation Value Forest (HCVF), including carbon credits and certification, will serve to reduce the contractual burden (e.g. volumes of timber harvest) and to diversify strategies of forest management.

1. Introduction

In Canada, while forestry has been one of its major industries since the eighteenth century, the forests have played a pivotal role in Aboriginal communities living there for thousands of years. The forests have been the place of their traditional subsistence activities, such as hunting, fishing, trapping and gathering, which have formed the backbone of their societies. Recently, however, Aboriginal communities that were once largely engaged in the non-monetary subsistence economy in their forests, have begun to need a certain level of jobs in order to maintain this traditional lifestyle. For forest-based Aboriginal communities, their forests will become precious sources to generate employment and business opportunities. Some Aboriginal groups have already started industrial forestry operations, and Aboriginal forestry sometimes takes the form of co-operation with non-Aboriginal groups (Anderson, 1997). The aim of this paper is to review, in the Canadian social context, the co-operative forest management approach taken by the Little Red River Cree Nation (LRRCN) in the northern part of the province of Alberta, and to discuss a new model that they are trying to undertake.

2. The province's jurisdiction over natural resources and Treaty Rights

The boreal forests in northern Alberta are rich in natural resources including not only forest resources but also oil and gas. The province of Alberta has assumed jurisdiction over natural resources since 1930 through the Natural Resources Transfer Agreement. As far as forestry is concerned, the province owns 87 % of its forests, and most of its available forested areas have been allocated to the forest industries through Forest Management Agreements (FMAs). An FMA is an area-based agreement whereby a forest company is granted a right to manage, harvest and grow forests within a specific area for a period of twenty years (renewal available). For an

FMA holder, an Allowable Annual Cut (AAC) is assigned based on the presumed growth rate of forests within a Forest Management Unit (FMU).

On the other hand, Aboriginal people in Canada have constitutionally-guaranteed rights to hunt and fish in their lands, which are called Aboriginal Rights. Aboriginal Rights flow from the fact that aboriginal people had already occupied and used the land of Canada before European powers arrived. The LRRCN has Treaty Rights, which flow from the fact that the Nation is one of the signatories of Treaty Eight, made in 1899. The treaty replaced Aboriginal rights with treaty rights; however, the federal government assures underlying rights to maintain an Aboriginal way of subsistence. Recently, there has been a growing tendency in court cases that Aboriginal and Treaty Rights are interpreted in a broader sense. Aboriginal use of natural resources even for commercial purposes is interpreted to be within the scope of Aboriginal Rights. Therefore, for the LRRCN communities, the treaty is a legal base for economic development, such as traditional subsistence and forestry operations by themselves within the Treaty area (Stevenson and Webb, 2003).

3. Co-operative of forest management in the traditional territory of the LRRCN

The Nation is bordered by Wood Buffalo National Park in the east and Caribou Mountains Wildlands Park in the north. The LRRCN consists of three communities along the lower Peace River: Fox Lake, John D'or Prairie (the administrative centre at W115’10’’, N58’30’’) and Garden River. Approximately 2,500 members reside on the reserves. The adjoining nation, the Tallcree First Nation (TCFN) is - so to speak - a brother First Nation to the LRRCN. The two Nations are unique in northern Alberta, where half of province’s Aboriginal populations live, in that they were the first to start a co-operative forest management with non-Aboriginal groups.

Once they hunted caribou, buffalo and moose, but by the 1960s, the expansion of farmlands, development of the oil and gas industry, and timber harvest encouraged by the provincial government resulted in a decrease in animal and waterfowl populations. Concerned about the deterioration of the ecological integrity of their forests and their communities’ health, and low employment opportunities, Chiefs *Johnsen Sewepagahm* of the LRRCN and *Bernie Meneen* of the TCFN decided to have discussions with non-Aboriginal sides. In 1995, the two First Nations signed a Co-operative Management Agreement (CMA) with the provincial government and a private forestry company (High Level Forest Products) (Fraser, 1996). As a research partner, the Sustainable Forest Management Network (SFMN) at the University of Alberta has been working with the nations from the outset.

Through two successive Memoranda of Understandings (MOU; the second MOU period started in 1998.), Planning Boards had mandates to develop guidelines for forest management for a Special Management Area (SMA), which is the part of the traditional territories set aside for these projects. The SMA was expanded, during the second MOU period, to include FMUs amounting to a 35,000 square-kilometre forested area (including a protected area of 6,000 square kilometres, and later this became Caribou Mountain Provincial Wilderness Park).

After the second MOU expired in 2001, the MOU was conditionally extended to the summer of 2003. At present, the government has declined to renew this agreement, and the First Nations and forestry companies have nevertheless maintained their relationship. Currently, LRRCN and the TCFN tenures are successfully assigned AACs of 566,000 and 115,000 cubic metres, respectively (Webb, 2004). Four Aboriginal forest companies are working with two private companies (Tolko Industries Ltd. and Footner Forest Products Ltd.) within the SMA, and logs harvested are sent to a mill in High Level (a town to the west of the communities).

4. A path to a co-operative forest management regime

While the Nations sought to gain economic values from the forests, they hope to avoid making the forests different from what they used to be. What they have sought is to establish an integrated resource management (IRM) plan, where the communities' voices (values and attitudes toward the forests) shall be reflected in the forest management regime. They intend to do this by taking part in the policy-making processes, rather than being alienated. A Traditional Land Use and Occupancy Study (TLUOS) is one vehicle for clarifying how the community members use the forests as a whole and what values they see in the forest landscape. Their patterns of occupation and land/resource uses have developed through their long-standing relationship with the landscapes they occupy, and their traditional land use (TLU) is integral to the culture of the community members. For instance, as noted above, hunting is an important occupation for the community members to maintain their identities, and game animals such as moose, fur-bearers and ducks are still highly valued as important food sources (Pyc, 1999; Nelson, 2003). Moreover, the elders and hunters from the communities are very knowledgeable about seasonal habitat use of the wildlife through long years of empirical observations and intergenerational cultural transmission (Schramm, 2002). If their Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) were being placed in the public arena in the form of clear, objective data, this would help policy-makers to predict important seasonal sites for wildlife and to estimate impacts of human uses on these sites. Thus, identification of TLU can clarify the nature and scope of their interests in the forest, and this can be a legal base for pursuing Treaty Rights. Based on this idea, the LRRCN has tried to inventory the following data, summarised by Jim Webb as the LRRCN "ecological footprint" (SFMN, 2001; Webb, 2004):

1) Culturally and spiritually important sites, such as camping sites, burials, sacred sites, and special land-use areas;
2) Subsistence commodities or resources taken from the forest; and
3) Ways of using the elements inventoried above for both cultural and subsistence purposes.

Further, the diverse set of values that community members have for the forest were collected and classified into the following six criteria (Natcher and Hickey, 2002):

I. To modify forestry operations to reduce negative impacts on <u>wildlife</u> species;
II. To modify forestry operations to ensure community <u>access</u> to lands and resources;
III. To provide <u>protection</u> to all areas identified by community members as having biological, cultural, and historical significance;
IV. To recognise and protect <u>Treaty Rights</u> to hunt, fish, trap, and gather;
V. To increase forest-based <u>economic opportunities</u> for community members; and
VI. To increase the <u>involvement</u> of community members in decision-making processes.

Incorporating these values into forest management will help lead to a true sustainable forest management regime.

5. AAC levels – A Challenge to sustainable forest management

Taking into consideration the communities' concerns (that is, non-timber values), it seems that industrial forestry operations may be incongruent with other values. A recent study shows that although a yearly stable volume of harvest of both coniferous and deciduous timber will provide the highest average job opportunities during the planning time of 200 years, it will cause a depletion of forest resources in the end. Even if ecological constraints are added, the model shows that both harvest volume and job opportunities will become exhausted (Krcmar et al.,

N.d.). This problem comes from the province's traditional approach that forest must be managed on a sustained yield basis (Alberta, N.d.). Once an AAC level is set up, the concerned forestry operators are required to keep harvesting that amount of timber from the forests during the period of the FMA. In the processes of the AAC calculation, Aboriginal land use is not taken into account. Therefore, in order to ensure that the forests can continue to support their culture, the First Nation needs a new management model, which goes beyond mere timber exploitation.

6. New vision

Merely lowering of AAC levels will only cause the reduction of LRRCN's revenue from timber, employment and business opportunities. Recently, LRRCN has been examining the viability of a High Conservation Value Forest (HCVF) management model, which will meet one of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)'s principles to evaluate whether a forest being managed is socially, environmentally, and economically sustainable. The HCVF model aims at promoting biodiversity of the forests, the environmental amenities, and an eco-friendly way of forest management. Instead of selling timber commodities, LRRCN will explore a new market for selling "conservation shares," which may offset some of the economic loss caused by the reduction of the AAC levels (Webb, 2004). The HCVF model includes: 1) Carbon sequestration, and 2) Caribou conservation certificates. For the carbon sequestration strategy, LRRCN is planning to apply to the Pilot Emission Removals, Reductions and Learnings (PERRL) Initiative, in which Environment Canada encourages Canadian companies, organisations and individuals to sell verified, green house gas emission reduction certificates. They are also considering certificates regarding the conservation of caribou populations and habitats. Surveys by World Wildlife Fund (WWF) show that the southern slope of the Caribou Mountains and the north-west slopes of the Birch Mountains (at the south-eastern part of the SMA) provide important habitats for woodland caribou. Certification is now an important tool for wood product companies to gain access to markets because of the growing environmental awareness of the public. Certified wood will satisfy public demand for ecologically sound forest management.

In effect, the LRRCN is taking a form of the TRIAD approach. The TRIAD is a zoning approach where (at least) three different scenarios are implementing in three different land bases at the same time within an FMU: 1) an area set aside for conservation, 2) an area allocated for extensive forest management, and 3) an area allocated for intensive forest management. Zone 1 is reserved for ecological diversity, though it can also support Aboriginal TLU. Zone 2 is used for multiple purposes including TLUs as well as extensive forestry. The rest of the land base (Zone 3) is to be used exclusively for the production of commercial timber (intensive forestry). Intensive forestry includes plantation and other operations that enhance the productivity of the forests. The HCVF model will be part of this multiple-zoned forestry strategy. If realised, these attempts will be a means for creating a new market for environmental services.

7. Conclusion

Over the past decades, growing environmental awareness has created a new industrial landscape where environmental groups, acting internationally, have gained influence in the Canadian political economy. At the same time, Aboriginal groups, who have a unique relationship to the environment, have begun to muster moral and legal justification for their land use. Along with environmentalists, they are becoming a new social force, which can challenge traditional resource-based industries including the forestry sector and can provide new different values (Wallace and Shields, 1997). The advent of certification systems is a good example for it.

Before, the LRRCN was searching for forest values within their communities, but now they are seeking to accommodate new values from outside of their communities, nationally and internationally. An appeal to sell carbon credits and to preserve caribou and its habitats may attract much attention from the public. Old cultural values emphasising the natural environment may be reshaped to conform to those of the external world, which may in the end reshape the community's cultural identity. Like Aboriginal tourism, Aboriginal business has great potential for changing their communities, for better or for worse.

The LRRCN communities decided to gain control over their forest, access to this forest and benefits from the forest. Now, they are tackling a global economy to seek control of, access to, and benefits from new markets. Since eighty percent of Canada's Aboriginal communities are located in its forests, there are good possibilities that a new forest management regime and a new forest culture may be created from Aboriginal participation in forest management. The LRRCN intends to be a pioneer in the move from a sustained yield plan to a sustainable forest management plan.

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