

Negotiating Concepts of Land: The Eastern James Bay Cree, Colonialism, and Resource Exploitation

Author(s): Susan M. Preston, McMaster University

Researchers in several disciplines have learned that people develop particular kinds of values and attitudes toward the environments around them. Very often these values and attitudes come to be shared among members of a community or even an entire cultural group as a result of common experiences and communication. Environmental values can be influenced by how people interact with their environments — for example, if they use it to make their living, for recreation, health, or for spiritual purposes, among others. Governments, businesses, and entrepreneurs often value natural environments from an economic perspective as resources for development, providing energy, construction materials, precious gems, and other valuable items. In many societies and cultures, claims for the right to use the environment for various activities are based on the concept of property. However, property rights have had different meanings for different peoples, and these differences continue to be a source of conflict and negotiation. The concept of property as it is widely understood in the developed world today is based on a particular Western European way of understanding the world and the place of humans within it. This concept is not consistent with the historical world views of many Indigenous cultures. When European countries colonized regions around the world, they disregarded the existing social arrangements for environmental use which were being practiced by the Indigenous peoples already living there. Indigenous environmental management practices were based on their own world views, but colonizers did not know about these views and for the most part did not care to understand them. The history of these misunderstandings is well-documented for many peoples.

Globalization can be seen as the contemporary expression of processes that began with the era of European imperialism. The political and social dynamics of colonization, in many cases, have caused dramatic and sometimes rapid changes for indigenous societies that were often removed from their homelands to make way for the kinds of land uses that the colonists valued. Colonizers challenged not only the indigenous right to land and resources, they also challenged the world views and related livelihood practices of Indigenous peoples.

For several years, I have been researching environmental meanings and values — how they are formed and shared, expressed through culture, and how they influence environmental behaviour and policy. For this investigation I wanted to learn what influence, if any, the natural resource interests of the Canadian and Quebec governments had on Eastern James Bay Cree's concepts of land and property, and how these related to this Indigenous culture's world view and autonomy. I chose to focus on a clearly defined series of five significant governmental impositions into Cree's management practices between 1932 and 2005. Although the British and French carried on a fur trade with the Crees for over 200 years, the newly formed Dominion of Canada only began to survey and map potential economic resources in the Cree territory during the late nineteenth century. These resources included minerals, timber, furs, and fish, and by 1920 they also included water power for electricity generation, but the subarctic geography and climate made it unattractive for most non-native settlers.

The Euro-Canadian view of this environment has been to consider it as a resource waiting to be harvested, but the Cree view was very different. Up to at least the early decades of the twentieth century they understood the environment to be comprised of the earth, vegetation, animals, climate, spirit persons, and humans. Each of these components was known to be conscious moral beings, interacting with each other on the basis of reciprocity and respect. It was a holistic ecological and social system. Crees had made their living by hunting and gathering in this region for 5,000 years. The idea of property ownership as it was understood by the colonizing governments was not at all appropriate in this very different cultural context. This history is rich and complex, and a short summary such as this cannot do justice to its complexity; readers are reminded that nothing was as simple as it may seem.

At the time of the first government imposition into Cree environmental practices in 1932, missionary attempts to persuade Crees to abandon their own cosmology had been largely ineffective. In an attempt to salvage the beaver pelt industry following severe over-harvesting, the Dominion government worked with Cree hunters to create a system of preserves that eventually covered the entire 345,000 square km of the Crees' traditional subsistence landscape. In order to oversee management of the program, Cree hunting leaders were assigned the formal task of monitoring and reporting beaver populations on their hunting ground back to government representatives, and in order to facilitate this activity, all of the customary family hunting grounds were formally mapped and registered as fixed hunting territories. This process gave the government unprecedented knowledge of this environment, it also was likely to have had some important conceptual impacts for the Crees. It raised the possibility of thinking about land in clearly bounded portions, and asserted official status on trapline "managers." It removed absolute control of environmental decisions from the Crees for the first time.

The most dramatic event in my research framework is the beginning of hydroelectric development by the Province of Quebec, formally announced in 1971 without any consultation with the Crees. After winning and then losing a legal challenge against the project, the Crees resorted to negotiating a modern treaty with Quebec and Canada while the mega-dam was built. In 1975 the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement was signed, and history has shown that the intent of its carefully structured language was understood quite differently by the Crees and the governments. The Agreement gave Quebec the right to proceed with a vast long-term program of hydro development across the Cree territory, and entrenched Cree rights in a form that was certainly less than they had been prior to colonization. The land was administratively organized into categories and Quebec asserted ownership over all but 1.5 percent of it, with Crees' having continuing access and distinct rights of use. In the course of these negotiations, Cree representatives entered the global political arena, taking their case to the United Nations and other international institutions. The development caused environmental destruction over a vast area, permanently flooding more than 13,000 square km where Crees had always lived by hunting and gathering, where they raised families, and buried their dead. More hydro development was announced in 1989, with plans to flood another 9,000 square km. It was shelved after the Crees successfully organized a highly publicized resistance with support from environmental non-governmental organizations in Canada and the United States. Yet Quebec retained plans to develop additional hydro projects, and as these progressed the Crees negotiated a new treaty in 2002 that was intended to assure Quebec's accountability and Cree rights.

Throughout this history of colonial interest in the natural resources of the Cree territory, subtle transformations can be observed in Cree concepts of land. In very general terms, from a traditional position of land or landscape as social interaction in which the human person is but one participant with conscious agency, we can trace the emergence of other ways of thinking. Notions of land as a

working resource with internal functional boundaries, to land as cultural identity, to land as heritage, as property, and most recently as an abstract economic resource are all apparent. Traditional meanings have been retained to varying degrees and have been renegotiated such that a complex layering of meanings now exists.

Changes in Cree autonomy have been far more significant. While other factors have also contributed to these changes, I believe that these resource interests have been primary catalysts at every stage. Prior to the era of beaver preserves, Cree autonomy existed at the level of the individual and more importantly perhaps, the family hunting group, based on the need to survive in remote environments. Beaver preserves and trapline registration appear to have initiated a subtle shift in some aspects of autonomy that may be nearly contradictory to each other. Hunting leaders were assigned official — if only symbolically — roles of authority among the Crees, but answered to the non-native managers, who entered into new decision-making roles regarding Cree hunting. Far more amplified were the impacts of the 1970s hydro and treaty initiatives — simultaneously forcibly denouncing Cree autonomy and yet providing the impetus for the emergence of a highly sophisticated resistance and eventual international position in the negotiation of Indigenous peoples' rights. A shift in scale also resulted, from the family hunting group to the community and entire First Nation as a social, political, and cultural entity.