

Grassy Narrows: Still fighting to live

by Toronto Star *Monday December 01, 2003 at 10:31 AM*

Hydro-electric development flooded the land around them, their reserve was arbitrarily moved, their children were lost to the horrors of residential schools and the fish that was the staple of their diet was poisoned.

Grassy Narrows: Still fighting to live

KATE HARRIES
ONTARIO REPORTER

GRASSY NARROWS—Hydro-electric development flooded the land around them, their reserve was arbitrarily moved, their children were lost to the horrors of residential schools and the fish that was the staple of their diet was poisoned.

The people of Asubpeeschoewagong (Grassy Narrows) have undergone untold trauma in the past 50 years.

They've received compensation — but far less than the subsidies given to the pulp and paper companies whose discharges spread toxins through the lakes and rivers of this sparsely beautiful northern landscape.

Then the trees started to fall in great swathes, hundreds of square kilometres that once were intimately familiar berry-picking or trapping territory suddenly razed, unrecognizable and empty.

They fought back, using the administrative and legal procedures available to them.

They travelled to Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal to lobby. They held protests. But the logging machines moved ever closer.

Last fall, work started on a new road within a few kilometres of the 36-square-kilometre reserve, home to 700 people.

"It was like an alarm for us," said resident Judy DaSilva.

The blockade went up Dec. 3 on Jones Rd., just off Highway 671, 80 kilometres north of Kenora. It was a challenge to Abitibi-Consolidated, largest producer of newsprint in the world, and a challenge to the Ontario government, which makes the rules on the Crown land it leases to forest companies.

Spearheaded by women and young people, rather than the official band leadership, the protest has lacked the macho style of other high-profile aboriginal land use disputes.

In the first couple of months, there were angry words when logging contractors tried to get through. But the exchanges never turned physical and no charges were ever laid.

Local OPP have kept an eye on the situation, with an officer dropping by from time to time, but they have not been a constant presence. A team from Christian Peacemakers, a group that's on the front lines of more notorious hot spots like Hebron, Palestine and Chiapas, Mexico, is camped at the blockade, on hand to cool things down.

Members of the Warrior Society, prominent during the 1999 Oka crisis, have been here, but have played by the rules set by the locals. Ironically, if there had been violence, it's likely that this David and Goliath battle would have attracted more media coverage than the regular reports that appear in environmental or social justice outlets like the Taiga Rescue Network or the Turtle Island Native Network News.

But aggressive tactics would also probably have sparked a punitive response, DaSilva said. "They might have sent in the SWAT team ... Us being mothers at the front line, it has been really peaceful."

After a year, the quiet face-off in the bush has produced a change.

For the first time, Abitibi-Consolidated, which has a natural resources ministry licence to take timber from the 11,000-square-kilometre Whiskey Jack Forest, has come to the table.

General manager Don Hopkins and other company officials travelled to Kenora from their Montreal headquarters and met with a group from Grassy Narrows two weeks ago.

Abitibi's offer: To stop logging within 10 km of the community, and use harvesting practices that don't involve clearcutting within 20 km, along with funding for youth education and job creation programs for the First Nation.

The 20-kilometres radius provides for a zone of 1,250 square kilometres, said company spokesperson Marc Osborne, who denied that the offer resulted from publicity associated with the year-long blockade and recent Grassy Narrows approaches to the U.S. McClatchy newspaper group, an Abitibi client.

"The issue is not the blockade," Osborne said in a telephone interview, explaining that Abitibi wants to work out a partnership with the First Nation. Just last week, in another departure for the company, Abitibi announced a partnership with World Wildlife Fund-Canada to identify forest areas that should be preserved for environmental or social reasons.

Grassy Narrows leaders, who claim their traditional land use area covers 6,500 square kilometres, have been guarded in their response to Abitibi's offer.

"I think it's a beginning," Chief Simon Fobister said in a telephone interview. "Their

statement that they're willing to change their way of harvesting opens the door that there's something here that we can maybe build on."

Fobister emphasized that Grassy Narrows is not opposed to logging in the area. But "this clearcutting policy is madness. Why can't there be another way?"

He favours selective harvesting methods like those practised in Scandinavia that preserve the forest habitat and allow for logging to take place concurrently with other uses like trapping, hunting or eco-tourism.

It's a position espoused by many environmental groups who disagree with much of the science behind current natural resources ministry policies, and especially clearcutting, a practice the ministry says simulates a forest fire, which is how the boreal forest renews itself.

But a forest fire is a chemical process that enriches the soil and breaks the dormancy of northern seeds, Fobister contends, while clearcutting is mechanical, removing nutrients and exposing the thin soil to erosion.

"We have big rains here, all the soil will be gone. There'll be clear rock. Sediments and soils will plug up the creeks, impact the spawning grounds," Fobister said.

"It's causing irreparable damage."

The dispute is one of many hot topics facing the new Liberal government. Natural Resources Minister David Ramsay said in an interview that he's aware of the Abitibi offer and is waiting to see what the band's response will be.

"My message to all the parties involved and certainly to this ministry is that First Nations are part of the boreal forest, they always have been," Ramsay said. "We're starting a new beginning."

'Your legs go, your arms go, your lungs go and then you can't breathe.'

Deputy Chief Steve Fobister

Fobister said Abitibi's proposal is the first move by the company following years of foiled attempts to make contact, the most recent being a visit in September to Montreal when he and deputy chief Steve Fobister met with John Weaver, the company's president and CEO, and other officials.

The meeting was a disappointment, Fobister said. "They told us their company were experts in clear-cutting and the Ontario government was the one that came up with the clearcutting policy and basically they were implementing that policy."

Grassy Narrows leaders then decided to take their case to a wider audience.

In October, Steve Fobister wrote to Gary Pruitt, president of the McClatchy company, headquartered in Sacramento, Ca., asking that the group stop buying newsprint from Abibitibi's Kenora mill. The Star-Tribune in Minneapolis is the group's largest paper.

Pruitt responded with a statement published in the Sacramento Bee, saying Star-Tribune officials were discussing the situation with Abitibi. Earlier this year, the Bee featured Grassy Narrows in a series called 'State of Denial,' which reported that as logging has declined in the U.S. for environmental reasons, it has increased in Canada.

Osborne confirmed there were discussions. "We gave them our side of the story," he said.

The episode prompted an angry response from Kenora Mayor Dave Canfield, who denounced the band to the local media. Forestry is a key source of employment in Kenora, where 390 Abitibi workers will be on a month-long temporary layoff starting Dec. 12.

"You don't bite the hand that feeds you," Canfield said.

That infuriated Grassy Narrows residents.

"We always fed ourselves from what the Creator has given us — the land and the fish and the birds," said Simon Fobister. "Before the 1970s, we were big commercial fishermen, we guided, our people, took care of themselves."

The small Ojibway tribe has contended with a litany of disasters in the last half-century, resulting in the traditional symptoms of an alienated community — alcoholism, family breakdown and unemployment.

The first drastic change came in the 1950s when generating stations built by Ontario Hydro caused massive flooding, drowning fur-bearing animals and destroying wild rice fields.

The hardest blow came in 1963, when community members were pressured by the federal government to move to a location by a just-completed highway from an isolated spot by the Narrows. The major lure was that there would be an elementary school, meaning that the young children wouldn't have to go to a residential school where they were cruelly mistreated.

The move was highly disruptive. At the old reserve, people lived according to the clan system, with the homes of each clan at least a kilometre apart. The new reserve is laid out European-style along the road.

"It was a new thing for us, living with your neighbours, who are not closely related," said former chief Bill Fobister

Many people now in their 50s remember this painful time, when parents turned to alcohol and became abusive or neglectful.

In 1970, the public learned that a chemical factory opened in 1962 by Reed Ltd. in Dryden, 320 km upstream of Grassy Narrows, had been dumping mercury-contaminated effluent into the English-Wabigoon river system — an estimated 10 tonnes over eight years.

The economic fallout for the Lake of the Woods area was magnified on the two Indian reserves — Grassy Narrows and Whitedog — where most employment was in either the commercial fishery that was closed down, or in the tourism sector devastated by the adverse publicity.

The mercury's still there, at the bottom of the rivers and lakes, although its effect on the environment is decreasing. Environment ministry tests on walleye found mercury concentrations of 2.69 parts per million in 1972, and 0.91 this year. Restrictions on consumption are advised above 0.45, with no consumption at all above 1.57 ppm.

The mercury is still there, in the living tissue of Grassy Narrows residents, even though, for most, it's well under Health Canada's risk level of 30 ppm. Some have been born with congenital abnormalities, many more suffer from symptoms associated with mercury poisoning, which include tingling, loss of balance, walking and hearing difficulties, tremors or tunnel vision. Complications include diabetes, thyroid problems and strokes.

Dr. Masazumi Harada revisited Grassy Narrows in September, 2000, in a bitter-sweet reprise of his first visit at the height of the mercury crisis, in 1975. In a report issued this summer, he found that 45 of 57 people tested, or 80 per cent of the sample, showed symptoms of mercury poisoning, and recommended further research. One case was an 8-year-old girl.

Harada also noted that 19 people he identified as having mercury poisoning had been rejected for compensation by the mercury disability board, set up in 1986 by the federal and provincial governments as part of the compensation to the Grassy Narrows and Whitedog First Nations.

A Health Canada official said it's difficult to differentiate between mercury poisoning and other disease such as Huntington's, muscular sclerosis, Alzheimer's or vitamin deficiency.

Deputy Chief Steve Fobister looks at the tremor in his hands and the way he sometimes finds himself unable to speak. With a mercury level of around 50 ppm, he fears that he knows the fate that awaits him.

"My brother Matthew was 200 ppm," he said. "He died at the age of 43. ... I know what the end looks like and it's a terrible end. Your legs go, your arms go, your lungs go and then you can't breathe."

After Steve and Simon Fobister travelled to Ottawa to meet him in September, Indian Affairs Minister Bob Nault agreed to help fund a meeting of the parties to the mercury disability board in the New Year, to reassess eligibility rules.

The band has tried to tackle the forestry issue through the courts. In 2000, Sierra Legal Defence Fund launched a suit on behalf of three Grassy Narrows trappers, arguing that the province's forestry practices infringe treaty rights to hunt, trap and fish that were guaranteed by the federal government when it signed Treaty 3 in 1873.

As the case laboriously makes its way through the courts, the forest around Grassy Narrows has been disappearing. For many, DaSilva said, the problems seem insurmountable.

"We realize that a lot of the older generation say it's a lost cause," she said. "I think it's because they've had so many fights."

But a new generation has a different take, she said. "The youth here have said, no clearcutting, no negotiation and no compensation. They didn't want money because they've seen from the hydro flooding and the mercury poisoning that we were left with nothing."

To those that say the deal proposed by Abitibi is a good first step, DaSilva responds that it would be a step in the wrong direction. Abibitibi follows rules made by the Ontario government, and that's who Grassy Narrows should be dealing with, she said.

"When we started way back, we knew that was the bottom line, we need to change the laws. ... I don't want the first step to be with Abitibi. I want it to be with the lawmakers."