



## **Grassy Narrows Fights for their Future**

**By Lauren Carter**

The people of Asubpeeschoseewagong (Grassy Narrows First Nation), located 80 kilometres north of Kenora, in Northern Ontario, have seen more than their share of suffering.

In the early 1960s, they were uprooted by Indian Affairs. In the 1970s, the government informed them that several tonnes of inorganic mercury from a pulp and paper mill upstream in Dryden had contaminated their water and fish.

While the band eventually received compensation from the Reed Paper Company and the Federal Government, the mercury remains, seriously affecting the health of the land, and a percentage of the 14-square-mile reserve's residents still suffer the effects of mercury poisoning.

Add to this the ongoing flooding of their sacred sites, traditional lands and wild rice fields by Ontario Hydro, threats to dump nuclear waste on their Customary Lands, the nightmare of residential schools, sky-high unemployment, and resulting cultural and social problems and you've got a fair mix of misery.

And it isn't over yet.

### **More trouble on the way**

In the latest threat to their well-being, Montreal-based forestry giant Abitibi-Consolidated, which pulled in more than four billion dollars in 2002 and supplies Knight Ridder newspaper chain, the New York Times, and the Washington Post (among others) with newsprint, is pushing for approval of a 20-year-plan to "manage" the Whiskey Jack Forest including the last remaining stand of old-growth boreal forest on Asubpeeschoseewagong traditional lands.

The Grassy First Nations might as well be on the moon for the amount of trees and plants and animals they'll have around them if this plan goes through.

While regeneration is seen to be the great hope, it will not assist inevitable soil erosion and the 40 percent of plant and animal species dependent on the sensitive ecosystem of the boreal forest.



Irrevocable damage has already been done.

"Over 50 percent of our traditional land has been clear-cut. There's reforestation but it's all monoculture tree farming. They plant trees they're going to harvest again. The land is turning into a tree farm," says Joe Fobister, spokesperson for the Grassy Narrows First Nation Environmental Committee.

Abitibi's new plan, dubbed the "Whiskey Jack Management Plan" would secure the corporation's right to harvest the forest in five year increments from April 2004 until 2024 despite Aboriginal treaty rights set out in the Royal Proclamation of 1763, further secured by Treaty #3 and, further still, by the Canadian constitution.

The community has been battling Abitibi, the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR), and the Ontario government for years in an effort to develop selective logging practices that would sustain the ecosystem that the local First Nation's depend on.

In 2000, Joe Fobister, Willie Keewatin and Andy Keewatin Jr. initiated a case against the Ontario government (with defense from the Sierra Legal Defence Fund) arguing that Abitibi's operations infringed on their constitutional rights to hunt and trap in their traditional lands.

That same year, protesters lobbied when the corporation clear-cut a large area in Wahgoshig First Nations traditional territory, cutting trees that marked graves on ancestral burial sites. This cut came irregardless of on-going talks between Abitibi, the MNR, and Wahgoshig leaders.

### **Clear cutting continues**

Despite all efforts - including raising issues in Abitibi's public consultation sessions, a process that has proved irrelevant for many - clear cutting has continued, eliminating the forest, destroying the ecosystem, bit by bit.

"We're seeing animals that are diseased. The Government of Ontario claims that it's caused by parasites but we never saw these diseases up until ten years ago. It's becoming a common thing to see animals with tumours on their lungs, white spots on their livers," Fobister says.

And no one, it seems, will listen.

Part of the problem is that the Government of Ontario is insisting that the band's Customary Lands - 2500 square miles surrounding the 14 square miles of their reserve - is actually Crown Land.

For the Government, the MNR, and the corporation, this belief, as false as it is according to Treaty 3 and the Canadian Constitution, means that there is nothing wrong with exiling 700 members of a land-based culture onto a tiny island in the middle of a weak and unhealthy forest, largely stripped bare by clear cuts.

"[The Province of Ontario] won't recognize our existence," Fobister says in frustration. "The MNR is serving the corporation. I'd say they're in bed together."

Indian Affairs Minister Robert Nault has refused to become involved in the issue, saying it is a matter for the MNR, and angering many.

### **Public support grows**

In response to being ignored while the system-at-large gradually whittles away their land and their way of life - a process that suggests to many a continued cultural genocide - members of the Grassy Narrows First Nation decided to take the process into their own hands.

Last December, they issued an invitation for public consultation with Abitibi and the MNR - to take place in the middle of a clear-cutting access road, five kilometres from the Grassy Narrows community. Since then, protesters have been blocking company access into the last remaining old growth of the Whiskey Jack Forest. Solidarity - from First Nation's communities and both Native and non-Native activist groups - has been strong.

And still, Joe Fobister says that in Abitibi's annual work schedule, exhibited to the public in early April, it appears they plan to continue logging on the land that the protesters are occupying. It'll be business as usual once the roads dry, and the logging trucks resume their duties.

While the corporation waits, the blockade maintains a presence with a handful of people. Two portables - out of the four used to house people and school the youth over the winter - have been taken away.

But Judy DaSilva, also from the Environmental Committee says not to worry. Plans continue for further actions including a youth gathering at the blockade in June.

And once the trucks have started moving again, near the end of May, the warriors will return to their positions en masse. For if they don't protect the land for themselves and for their children and their children's children, who, exactly, will?

For more information on how you can help phone the Grassy Narrows Band Office at 807-925-1041 or email [fobister@hotmail.com](mailto:fobister@hotmail.com)

<http://www.firstnationsdrum.com/Spring2003/CovGrassy.htm>