A study of natural resource use by the Nehiyaw (Cree) First Nation

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Abstract: The traditional relationship – that Aboriginal peoples in Canada have had with their land and its resources – has changed significantly since the arrival of Europeans. During the 17th and 18th centuries, trade relations with the newcomers introduced to Aboriginal peoples: 1) capitalism; 2) the capitalist view toward land; 3) the exploitation of resources. The newly formed Canadian Government in the late 19th century with its Indian policy expedited the shift to a capitalist economy with the creation of Indian reserves. During the mid-20th century, First Nations began to view economic interests as a part of their own development agenda. Today, Aboriginal people have developed new systems of self-government and self-determination that have increased their participation within the economy at all levels. They have expanded their jurisdictions and have created modern economic opportunities that include the management of resources in areas such as agriculture, forestry, fishing, water and non-renewable resources as examples.

Keywords: Aboriginal; natural resources; land management; economy; land use; environment; traditional territories.

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1 Introduction

Existing literature compares worldviews and the conflict among them. Cajete (2000) for example does a thorough job of exploring the traditional Aboriginal perspective. A theme in the literature is the recent trend to accommodate traditional values and practices in such things as land claims agreements, advisory boards, joint business ventures, co-management regimes, and environmental assessment. There has been a search for a sustainable development paradigm based on the synthesis of traditional environmental knowledge (TEK), and modern scientific knowledge. Our focus will be the Cree First Nations people who have long lived on the land now known as Canada. We will provide basic insight into contrasting worldviews and the conflict between them from first contact between Europeans and Cree, and discuss conflicting economic systems and related conflicting views of land ownership and natural resource use. Moving beyond generalities, we will illustrate how a particular Cree First Nation has undertaken successful economic activities in a way that combines both modern and traditional values and practices.

2 Two world views: a historical perspective

Aboriginal views, including those of the Cree and European views about land and resources have always differed, but the differences were not a source of conflict during
the fur trade era; the views could and did coexist. Mann (2000) described the period between first contact and the mid 1700s as being a period marked by a spirit of cooperation and respect for each other’s sovereignty. According to her, one of the reasons for this cooperation was the Europeans’ reliance on Aboriginal people’s knowledge of the land and how to survive on it.

However, European respect for Aboriginal sovereignty and traditional knowledge (TK), and the related spirit of cooperation did not last beyond the middle of the 18th century. In its place, a trend toward assimilation, disempowerment and marginalisation began to emerge. How did this change in colonial attitude come about and why? Mann (2000) found the answer to these questions in the evolving European economic system – the emergence of capitalism – and the thirst of capitalism for land and resources. With the simultaneous decline of the fur trade and the rise of capitalism, peaceful coexistence came to an end. Under capitalism, land and its resources became inputs of production, i.e., inputs that had to be owned by individuals before they could be used. This view was (and still is) in stark contrast to the traditional view of land as a place to live and the source of life. Bishop (1999) explored these contrasting views on land and land ownership in depth. He explained how Europeans came to ‘own’ the land and resources, at least according to their own rules.

The Cree have always used natural resources. Indeed, such use has always been a fundamental element of Aboriginal culture. What we wish to emphasis is that the nature of that use has changed over time. Three periods can be identified, as shall now be discussed.

The first is the period prior to first contact with Europeans. During this period, the traditional Aboriginal worldview held uncontested sway. The phrases ‘natural resources’ and ‘natural resource management’ fail to capture the relationship between people and the land during this period. The land and the things of the land were not viewed as separate from people and something to be managed and exploited. Instead, people and the earth in all its parts were considered as one. The world was a web of interrelationships and obligations, not a source of supply of resources to be used and managed to the benefit of people. This does not mean that Aboriginal people did not use the resources of the land. Of course they did, but when they did, it was as a part of a complex and reciprocal relationship inseparable from culture, values and spirituality.

The second period is one of European colonisation and then state-building extending from first colonisation until the very recent past. During this period, the traditional Aboriginal worldview, while not eliminated, was marginalised and the European view dominated. The land and its resources were seen separate from people; these were factors of production along with human and financial capital to be combined together to meet market needs. The process of treaty-making, legislation to control the First Nations, the development of Indian reserves and the implementation of residential schools during this period significantly undermined the Cree way of life and the traditional cultural relationship to the land and its resources. The phrase resource management and its connotations are associated with this period. So too is the notion that something can at the same time be good for people and bad for the environment, and that issue is one of trade-off.

The final period is the current one. Two forces are at play. The first is the emergence of the environmental movement and the sustainable development paradigm. Globally, there is an increasing realisation that humans and the environment are inseparable – something akin to the traditional Aboriginal worldview, and that the notion that something can at the same time be good for people and bad for the environment is
The other force is the considerable control Aboriginal people, including the Cree are regaining over their traditional lands and resources in Canada and elsewhere. With the emergence of the sustainable development paradigm and increasing Aboriginal control over vast tracts of lands and resources, there has also been a growing acknowledgement of the traditional Aboriginal worldview, and attempts to incorporate TEK in the ‘sustainable’ management of natural resources. We examine this third period in more depth in the section that follows.

3 The evolving use of natural resources over time

Since contact with Europeans, Aboriginal use of natural resources has evolved. There has been a cultural adjustment involving a blending traditional and commercial utilisation of natural resources. Today, traditional harvesting of wildlife from the land and water continues to play an important role in Aboriginal communities by supplying country food and by reinforcing traditional customs and values. At the same time, commercial use of natural resources by Aboriginal firms and individuals has increased, as Aboriginal people participate more actively in the market economy, sometimes sustainably and sometimes not. This is well illustrated by the actions of the Lac La Ronge Indian Band (LRIB) in the case that follows this general discussion.

Abel and Friesen (1991) recognised a growing interest by Aboriginal people in developing their natural resource for commercial purposes (see also Anderson et al., 2007; Meis-Mason et al., 2009; Missens et al., 2007) and the critical link between Aboriginal Rights, land title, and increased access to natural resources by Aboriginal people. The 1990s saw:

1 increased Aboriginal interest in participating in the market economy
2 modern land claim agreements providing greater control over traditional lands and encouraging Aboriginal development of the natural resources of these lands
3 court rulings, such as the Marshall Decision, that have confirmed and expanded Aboriginal rights to natural resources.

The passage of time has rendered both books outdated; hence this new book. This process continues in the 21st century.

During the final decades of the 20th century and continuing, a grudging respect for TK and practices has begun to emerge, and a place for these views has been accorded in ‘modern’ land use and resource management (Campbell, 2003; Usher, 2000; White, 2001). Usher (2000) explained that it has become a policy requirement in Canada, and especially in northern Canada, that TK or TEK be considered and incorporated into environmental assessment and resource management. But he elaborated that although the general policy requirement is in place, its wording is neither clear nor consistent, and there is virtually no guidance on how to implement it. He strived to find a way to include or accommodate TEK in a modern scientific approach to environmental assessment and resource management. Contrast this approach to the transformational role of TEK in the approach to land and resource management discussed by Nadasdy (1999). This has led others to explore the synthesis of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal views into something new that respects both and draws on the strengths of each (Corsiglia and Snively, 1997; Newhouse, 2000).
Campbell (2003) offered further insight into recent attempts to accommodate TEK in resource management activities. She begins her paper by exploring the reasons for the move to the inclusion of Aboriginal people in resource management after centuries of exclusion. At the core is a growing realisation by governments and corporations of the nature and extent of Aboriginal rights to land and resources. Governments and corporations did not come to this realisation willingly but rather did so reluctantly when forced to do so by the constitution, the courts, quasi-judicial bodies like the Berger Inquiry, and the continuing demands and protests of Aboriginal people. Nonetheless, it is now accepted Aboriginal people must be involved in decisions on land use and resource management. Campbell goes on to describe co-management as a method of achieving this inclusion. Like Usher’s description of TEK in environmental assessment, Campbell describes a system that allows Aboriginal participation and accommodates, to some extent, Aboriginal views on what should be done on the land and with its resources.

While certainly an improvement over centuries of exclusion, Corsiglia and Snively (1997) and Nadasdy (1999) argue that the co-management process (like the environmental impact assessment process) remains a western scientific and economic process that accommodates TEK but only to a limited extent and on non-traditional terms. Corsiglia and Snively (1997) and Nadasdy (1999) argue instead for a complete transformation of the entire land use and resource management paradigm into one that has TEK and the worldview from which it emerges at its core. In this new approach, ‘western science’ will be a useful tool, but it will not determine the nature of the process or its outcomes; nor will the economy and the environment be seen as separate where what is good for one is often bad for the other.

This is not a new idea, nor is it restricted to the Aboriginal context in Canada. The sustainable development paradigm began its rise to popular prominence in 1987 with the publication of *Our Common Future*, the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (known as the Brundltland Commission). Among other things, the Commission attached great importance to TEK, arguing that the world views that gave rise to this knowledge were ‘sustainable’ in the past, and could form the foundation for sustainable development in the future. Corsiglia and Snively (1997) provided a ‘face’ and a ‘place’ to the discussion of TEK, and Nadasdy (1999) illustrated this view, as will now be discussed below.

Nadasdy (1999) noted the importance of TEK as an important first step toward the full participation of Aboriginal communities in the management of land and resources but that despite 15 years of effort to develop a method for integrating scientific and TK scientists remain essentially at a loss regarding TEK; he suggested many scientists were not quite sure as to what TEK was, and much less how to use it or integrate it. Exploring the reasons for this failure he found them in power relations as much as in the very real, fundamental differences between the two types of knowledge. He argued that efforts at integration had attempted to force TEK to fit the existing the western scientific view of what knowledge is and how knowledge should be used. This is so because those that hold the western scientific view also hold the power to determine how TEK is gathered and used. This resulted in efforts to ‘integrate’ TEK that have attempted to ‘compartmentalise’ it when it is holistic; ‘distil’ it when its strength is its richness and breadth of content; and render it universal when its is ‘local’ based on generations of people and their relationship to their ‘place’ or ‘territory’. As a result, what is called TEK and is ‘integrated’ is no longer TEK, only an abstract of it. Nadasdy (1999) concluded that any meaningful attempt to improve resource management practices and empower
local Aboriginal communities must acknowledge this aspect of the current attempt to ‘integrate TEK’ and science and develop a new approach; describing this new approach, Nadasdy stated that local beliefs, values and practices themselves – not merely abstract forms affixed to them – must be accepted as a valid basis for action. This will require changes in current practices of resource management and environmental assessment. He argued that the necessary change is one from an advisory to a decision-making role for those that know and live TEK. The role of western science will continue to be an important, part of informing the process but no longer controlling it. We have since moved some distance toward the approach argued for by Nadasdy (1999), and this process will continue as comprehensive land claims agreements evolve over time and courts could continue to clarify the nature and extent of Aboriginal rights to lands and resources and Aboriginal people exercise these rights (see: Anderson et al., 2004).

The Supreme Court of Canada has made a number of key rulings that have had great impact on Aboriginal people and their access to natural resources. Until recently, the federal and provincial governments did not recognise that Aboriginal people had claim to land beyond those defined by treaties. In 1973, this legal position was shaken the Calder case. Calder argued that the NisGa’a had Aboriginal title to their traditionally occupied land because they had never surrendered it to the Crown. While the Supreme Court narrowly ruled against Calder, the court did recognise that the NisGa’a had Aboriginal property rights and therefore Aboriginal title existed until the claim was extinguished (in the Calder case, three of the seven judges believed that the NisGa’a claim had been extinguished but all seven recognised that Aboriginal people had a claim on lands traditionally occupied by them prior to contract). After this ruling, the federal government accepted the principle of Aboriginal title and Ottawa set in motion a process of negotiations. The Inuvialuit Final Agreement (1984) marked the first modern land claims agreement between Ottawa and the Aboriginal Inuvialuit who claim much of the Western Arctic. [These people are the focus of Dana et al. (2008).] A summary of key Supreme Court of Canada decisions that have affected Aboriginal Title and therefore improved their access to natural resources is provided in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nowegijick</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Treaties must be liberally interpreted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guerin</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Ottawa must recognise the existence of inherent Aboriginal title and a fiduciary (trust) relationship based on title.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sioui</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Provincial laws cannot over rule rights contained in treaties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sparrow</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Section 35(1) of The Constitution Act 1982 containing the term ‘existing rights’ was defined as anything not extinguished.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delgamukw</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Oral history of Indian people must receive equal weight to historical evidence in land claim legal cases.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marshall</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Mi’kmaq have the right to catch and sell fish (lobster) to earn a ‘moderate living’.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Newhouse (2000) and White (2001) both address efforts to accommodate Aboriginal culture, values and practices in modern activities other than co-management and environmental impact assessment/resource management. White (2001) does so in the context of building new governments and government agencies in the Yukon and what was once the Northwest Territories, with a discussion relevant to resource management.
because governments (old and new) write the ‘rules of the game’. Newhouse (2000) talks about capitalism, but not just any capitalism. He talks about a capitalism transformed to some extent by the incorporation of Aboriginal values and practices. Aboriginal companies are increasingly involved in ‘resource development’. If such companies reflect traditional values and respect and use both TEK and modern scientific knowledge appropriately, they can be part of the process that transforms land use and resource management in ‘Indian Country’. An example of this dynamic process unfolding can be found in Anderson and Bone (1999).

4 Land use and the environment

Aboriginal people have a special relationship with the land. This holistic relationship has a spiritual foundation that goes back to the beginning of the Aboriginal world in North America. The sacred circle of life epitomises Aboriginal beliefs and its starting point is that all life is spiritual – animals, plants, and even the sun and stars. Plains Indians symbolised the circle of life with medicine wheels. Seemingly forever, the land has nurtured Aboriginal people by providing food for their physical sustenance and cultural well-being. In return, Aboriginal people have a responsibility to care for the land and its many creatures. The land and its natural resources hold the key to Aboriginal cosmology and culture.

Contact with Europeans introduced Aboriginal people to a culture new to them, one based on the ownership of property. Contact brought about fundamental changes to the land and to the way of doing things. Some were mutual beneficial while others had negative consequences for Aboriginal people. The fur trade brought about a beneficial partnership between the white traders and the Indian trappers. The loss of the great buffalo herds crippled the hunting economy of the Plains Indians and Metis. In 1871, the Cree chief Sweet Grass sadly but stoically informed Chief Factor W.J. Christie, “Our country is no longer able to support us” [Morris, (1889), p.171]. The psychological blow to their traditional beliefs was overwhelming. But not all regions suffered so hard and so fast. The caribou and sea mammals in Canada’s North did not endure the same fate as the buffalo and so the land continues to provide food for the northern Indians and Inuit. As Canada came under the control of Ottawa and the provinces, natural resources were subject to conservation, management, and licensing measures. Regulation of fish and wild animals falls under provincial jurisdiction but responsibility for Treaty Indians lies with Ottawa. Conservation measures designed for the general public tended to impact adversely on Aboriginal people who depend on access to wild food for their physical well-being and survival. Moreover, such laws came into conflict with the traditional ways of managing wildlife.

While Aboriginal people living well beyond Canada’s population acumen could turn to the land for much of their sustenance, access to the land changed radically in the 1950s when Aboriginal people began to move into settlements. While these settlement dwellers continued to harvest resources from the land, the pattern of hunting had changed – time on the land was much less and the hunting parties tended to consist of small groups of male hunters. Children remained in school where they were caught up the settlement life. Within a generation, Aboriginal people’s relationship with the land has had to adapt to new circumstances, which were propelled them toward commercial use of natural resources. A combination of factors led to these new circumstances, including large-scale
industrial projects, land claims agreements, court decisions that provide commercial access to resources, and the desire by Aboriginal individuals and organisations to engage in resource development as a means of helping themselves and their people. The Quebec Cree, for example, lost some of their prime hunting and fishing lands when these river valleys were flooded by the construction of the James Bay Project. In their negotiations with the province, the Quebec Cree obtained an income support program for their hunters and trappers. Known as the Income Security Program for Cree Hunters and Trappers, this popular program provides cash income for those who live on the land, thus relieving the province of providing social assistance payments for these hunters and trappers. A similar program exists for the Inuit of Nunavut, but in this case the funding comes from land claims funds through Nunavut Tunngavik Inc (Légaré, 2002).

By the 1980s, reassertion of Aboriginal control over their traditional lands was well underway. The next step was resource development by Aboriginal organisations. Notzke (1994, p.303) expressed these new circumstances as: “In a country that owes so much of its national character to resource frontiers created by immigrant society, it is now Aboriginal people who advance into ‘new territory’ by reclaiming lands and resources as well as management power over them”.

By the 21st century, First Nations had created a variety of business organisations that involve the commercial use of their natural resources. In an article by Tom Mason on the commercial development of reserve land known as the Truro Power Centre by Millbrook First Nation in Nova Scotia, the range of economic activities across Canada was impressive. Mason (2001, p.45) reported:

“Impressive as they may be, the strides that Millbrook residents are making are far from unique. In fact, they’re part of a new wave of native-run businesses sweeping Canada, bringing once-poor First nations a newfound prosperity. The Lac La Ronge Indian Band in northern Saskatchewan has developed Kitsaki Management Ltd to manage a portfolio of businesses that includes mining, insurance, trucking, and hospitality. BC’s Osoyoos Indian Band Development Corp. is now operating eight businesses, including a vineyard and a sawmill. And Peace Hills Trust, an Alberta-based financial institution with about $800 million in assets, may soon be a Power Centre tenant.”

While Mason (2001) was upbeat and focused on commercial successes, most First Nations are struggling to find their way in this commercial world that is so foreign to their traditional culture. One solution to this struggle of cultural adaptation is found in the comprehensive land claims agreements, which have created a dual structure, thus allowing a foot in the new world of commerce and the old world based on the land. In the case of the Inuvialuit Final Agreement, the Inuvialuit Game Council is concerned about the land and the harvesting of wildlife while the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation represents the Inuvialuit’s business arm.

Légaré (2002) discussed the role of Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. and its activities, programs, and organisation in terms of its relationship with the government of Nunavut. Nunavut Tunngavik Inc.’s specific role is the implementation of the Nunavut Land Claims Settlement. Myers (2002) argued in both of her papers that renewable resources offer better prospects for long-term economic development for Aboriginal northerners than large-scale industrial projects. Given the low level of involvement with large-scale industrial projects, Myers makes a persuasive argument. For local communities, small-scale local developments based on locally available natural resources are the order
of the day. Such an approach to community development, Meyers claims, would depend on the development and management of local renewable resources.

Natcher (2000) focused his attention on Aboriginal involvement in land and resource management particularly new organisation that lend themselves to dealing with the market economy. This process, according to Natcher (2000), leads to a form of institutionalised adaptation. Several examples follow.

Anderson and Bone (1999) report on the remarkable economic advances made by the Meadow Lake Tribal Council in the forest industry. Access to a provincial timber lease was a critical element in this success story. Forming a joint venture with a new pulp mill operated by Miller-Western Inc. was another critical element. The Meadow Lake Tribal Council is now a serious player in logging and timber operations in northwest Saskatchewan. The spin-off effects for the First Nations belonging to the Meadow Lake Tribal Council have been profound and have greatly increased the business confidence and self-esteem of many members of those First Nations.

McDonald (1998) recounts how forest operations on traditional territories are complicated by the legal interpretation and application of Delgamuukw, Badger, and Sparrow in the forestry context of British Columbia where few treaties have been signed. First Nations, McDonald argues, must seek business and political or even court solutions while treaty land entitlement and self-government negotiations continue. In the absence of settled claims, court rulings requiring that forestry firms conducting operations on lands claimed by First Nations consult with those First Nations provide Aboriginal people with opportunities to participate in the company’s forest operation.

Bird (2009) discusses the important issue of joint management of national parks. This issue has far-reaching implications because most national parks are adjacent to traditional hunting areas. If such management includes hunting, trapping, and fishing rights for Aboriginal people within these parks, then the area available for these traditional pursuits would be greatly increased.

Harwood et al. (2000) looked at the question of sustainable harvesting of Beluga whales by the Inuvialuit. In their study of the Inuvialuit harvest of Beluga whales, Harwood and her fellow federal government authors have carefully document the catch over time. One observation is the presence of large, older Beluga whales. They concluded that the current harvest level, which is below traditional levels, takes places at a sustainable level.

Irwin (2000) brings forward the issue of Indian hunting and fishing rights in the Canadian Prairie Provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. These rights are impacted by two separate regulatory structures: the Indian Treaties and Section 12 of the Natural Resources Transfer Agreements. Irwin argues that Ottawa did not intend to extinguish treaty rights through the Natural Resources Transfer Agreements that gave the three Prairie Provinces control over natural resources.

Kendrick (2000) focused on the issue of co-management of wildlife resources. In this case, Kendrick has examined the Beverly-Qamanirjuaq Caribou Management Board. While only an advisory board, the members, representing a combination of community and government members have, over the years, come to a better understand of the critical issues. Community perceptions of the board, however, vary.

Classen’s (2000) account of the Blood Tribe Agricultural Project indicates the importance of controlling water flowing across Blood Tribe lands. With access to this water, the Blood Tribe is able to irrigate their lands and engaged in commercial agriculture.
Donham (1999, 2001) has prepared a series of newspaper accounts of how the Marshall Decision has had a profound impact on Aboriginal access to the lobster fishery on the East Coast. Donham (1999, 2001) provides insights into the behind-the-scenes implications. He claims that the national media has fuelled ‘white’ hysteria about Aboriginal fishers depleting the lobster stocks. In fact, Donham (1999, 2001) claims that illegal fishing by white fishers at Yarmouth exceeds the total take by Aboriginal Fishers. Non-renewable resources are discovered and exploited where they are found. This ‘where’ is increasingly in remote areas that are the homelands of the world’s indigenous people. Ownership of the resources of these lands is often contested with Indigenous people claiming rights to the land and resources based on continuous occupancy and use and nation states claiming ownership by conquest or treaty. To complicate the situation, large multinational corporations usually exploit non-renewable resources. This means that non-renewable resource development brings together Indigenous people, state governments and multinational corporations. Until recently, the history of this coming together has worked to the advantage of the corporations and the nation states and to the detriment of the Indigenous people involved. As you will find in the articles that follow, this may be changing.

Anderson (2002), Bergman (2000) and Bone (1995) examined the changing relationship among Aboriginal people, governments (the state) and multinational oil and gas companies in northern Canada. In his opening paragraphs, Bone describes the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Project. As he says, initially it was expected that this project would proceed as others had in the past; after all it had the support of the government and the multinational corporations and would bring great economic benefits to the country. However, as Bone and Anderson separately discuss, this time Aboriginal interests were considered, and the project did not proceed. The process of consideration – the Berger Inquiry – is described in ‘The Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry’. As Anderson says, at the end of his inquiry Justice Thomas Berger ordered “a ten-year moratorium on pipeline construction in the Mackenzie Valley in order to strengthen native society, the native economy – indeed the whole renewable resource sector – and to enable native claims to be settled” [Anderson, (2002), p.24]. In Berger’s view such settlements “must be part of a fundamental re-ordering of the relationship between white and native, in order to entrench their rights to the land and to lay the foundations for native self determination under the Constitution of Canada” [Page, (1986), p.119]. In reaching this conclusion, Justice Berger ushered in a new era in the relationship between Canada and the Aboriginal people living within its borders. Currently the proposed Northern Gateway Pipeline has encountered fierce opposition from Indigenous and non-indigenous people alike, so the issue continues.

Boyd (2000) looked at the issue if indigenous people and non-renewable resource development in an international context. Here you will read about another conflict between Indigenous people, a national government and a multinational corporation. The Machiguena, Nahua and Kugapakori people faced the same problem in 2000 that the Inuvialuit did in 1974. However, they have not had the benefit a ‘Berger Inquiry’. The project has been delayed but only because of a dispute between Shell and the Peruvian Government. The government has granted the concession to another company and according to “Lelis Rivera, Director of the Centre for the Development of Amazon Indigenous Peoples … local people are prepared for an uphill battle with the new company”. Boyd’s article raises a pair of interesting questions. To what extent are multinational companies more environmentally and socially responsible now than they
were in the past? Will they be more respectful of Indigenous people rights and interests than they were in the past as a ‘good business practice’, or only if laws and regulations force them to?

Burke (1999) and Gibson (1998) offered further insight into the relationship between corporations and Aboriginal people in an oil and gas setting outside the far north and in the absence of a comprehensive land claims agreement. As you read the first article, you will see that the Metis of Anzac and Suncor seem to be working towards an understanding that respects the interests and objectives of both. Is this because Suncor must do so because of laws and regulations, or is it because they see working with Metis as a better way of doing business? A similar picture emerges in the second article on the Lubicon and Unocal. The article describes years of failure and distrust. However, it also indicates a potential for change might be emerging in part because corporations “are restructuring to accommodate and include community concerns … motivated by the expectation of achieving long-standing agreements … reflect recognition of the increasing power and influence of aboriginal groups”.

Wismer (1996) discussed some issues with respect to incorporating’ TK in environmental assessment and involving Aboriginal people in the process. The article also contrasts non-renewable and renewable resource use pointing out some of the difficulties in building and sustaining Aboriginal communities on a non-renewable resource base. Wismer concluded that it was not clear whether mineral development could be a spoke in the mixed economy wheel, which has subsistence at its hub, and the people in the Slave Lake communities know very little more after the BHP review than they did before. The panel did not address this question. She goes on to suggest that the BHP review had failed the people whose homelands take in the area around Lac de Gras, just as environmental assessment generally is failing Aboriginal peoples all across Canada. Missens et al. (2007) and Fennel and Selleck (1996) offered further insight ongoing Aboriginal concerns about the impact of diamond mining on their lands and way of life. Unless and until environmental assessment can begin to pick up where it left off after the Berger Inquiry and start to make a genuine contribution to addressing the complexities of northern development, Aboriginal peoples will be forced to pursue other routes for asserting their need to act as the legitimate stewards of their territories.

Okalik (2001) put forward a cautiously optimistic argument in favour of mining. He said that the Nunavut government was committed to working with residents, Inuit organisations and the private sector to ensure that we all benefit from mining development in the territory treasure chest of mineral resources as long as we work together towards sustainable development. With Premier Okalik’s statement we come full circle. It is generally agreed that traditional worldviews and TEK will play central role in a sustainable development paradigm. However, operationalising the paradigm is the challenge. Progress is being made slowly and fitfully, but it is being made. The case that follows illustrates efforts to undertake successful development in a sustainable and social/cultural appropriate manner.

5 The La Ronge First Nation: Northern Lights Foods

This case is an exploration of the entrepreneurship-innovation-marketing interface in a particular context, i.e., that of the LRIB in Northern Saskatchewan, Canada. Our purpose is not the provide new insight into either marketing or entrepreneurship in a theoretical
sense, but rather to illustrate the use of existing concepts and tools in an innovative and culturally appropriate manner by an Aboriginal community in Canada in pursuit of sustainable development goals. To do so, we will examine the socioeconomic circumstances of the people of the LRIB in the 1980s, the development activities undertaken by them to improve these circumstances, the outcome of these activities by 2001, and the challenge that remains. Then, we describe one of the LRIB’s current responses to this remaining challenge – Northern Lights Foods®, and, in particular, the entrepreneurial opportunity identified to harvest, process and market wild organic mushrooms and organic wild rice in Europe and Japan.

The LRIB is widely recognised as one of the leaders in Aboriginal economic development in Canada. The band is participating successfully in the global economy on its terms. Among many honours, in 1997 the LRIB (and its economic development arm, the Kitsaki Management Limited Partnership) was named Aboriginal Economic Developer of the Year by the Council for the Advancement of Native Development Officers. In 2001, one of the Kitsaki companies, Kitsaki Meats, was the recipient of a Canada Export Award recognising ‘its spirit of innovation and the excellence of its goods and services’. From its creation in 1981 the KDC’s strategy for improving the socioeconomic circumstances of the people of the LRIB has been to form “sound, secure partnerships with other Aboriginal groups and successful world-class businesses in order to generate revenue for Kitsaki and employment for Band members” [McKay, (2002), p.3]. In implementing this strategy

“Kitsaki seeks to create and manage a portfolio of active business investments rather than the individual companies. We try to obtain a majority interest in a business with a highly motivated entrepreneur or a strong corporate partner. We then work with that partner to maximize profits, employment, and training opportunities.” [McKay, (2002), p.1]

Implementing this strategy, the KDC has created a number of business ventures (see Table 2), some wholly owned and others partnerships. A brief description of each of the Kitsaki companies can be found in Appendix. This material was drawn from Kitsaki’s website supplemented by information provide during site visits and interviews.

Northern Lights Foods was created by the LRIB in 1999. It is the product of a carefully crafted and successfully implemented strategy to take Kitsaki’s products – initially wild rice and beef jerky – to the world markets in order to increase employment for LRIB members and create wealth for the community. Prior to 1999, Kitsaki had modest success with both products internationally and wanted to build on this foundation. The company saw the opportunity to ‘brand’ its products and in doing so appeal to the growing organic market and the market for nutritional snacks. Kitsaki felt that it could build this image around four sources of competitive advantage.

The first is the success in having their wild rice certified as organic (followed the mushrooms and soon the berries). The second is the widely held international image of Northern Canada as a pristine wilderness, free from pollution and ‘natural’. Related to the second, the third source of competitive advantage is the image of Aboriginal people as traditional and closer to nature and not tarnished by modern ills. Finally, Kitsaki has experience in wild rice and beef jerky industries and has an established distribution network.

Based on these strengths, Kitsaki set out to build a product mix of complementary organic and ‘healthy’ products. Currently, the company has a Meat Snack Division and
an Organic Foods Division. The Meat Snack Division produces high quality beef jerky, which sold under the Northern Lights brand name, as well manufactured and packaged for numerous private label companies. The production plant is operated under strict federal government regulations mandated and inspected by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. In the spring of 2003, a plan was developed to construct a new 30,000 sq. ft. manufacturing facility by the end of 2003. The new plant was necessary to meet increasingly stringent regulatory requirements and increase manufacturing capacity to meet growing production demands.

The Organic Food Division has ten full-time employees and over 1,000 seasonal workers involved in the harvesting, processing and marketing of organic wild rice and organic wild mushrooms. At the peak of the season, rice operations provide employment more than 700 people, many of them independent small business operators. Further, the employment is ‘on the land’ and a good fit with other seasonal land-based activities such as trapping, hunting, fishing, mushroom and berry harvesting. In addition, Northern Lights purchases wild rice from over 100 independent organic producers in Northern Saskatchewan. On a seasonal basis the harvest of mushrooms employs a large number of people by northern Saskatchewan standards – approximately 300, all independent contractors and therefore small business people. The season begins with morels in April, then chanterelles in mid-July and finally pine mushrooms in August. The mushroom harvest season is a good fit with the other activities important to those making their living on and from the land, falling as it does between the winter trapping season and the fall wild rice harvest.

Table 2  Kitsaki companies, employees and salaries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of business</th>
<th>LRIB</th>
<th>Estimated salaries</th>
<th>Other Aboriginal</th>
<th>Estimated salaries</th>
<th>Non Aboriginal</th>
<th>Total workforce</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Athabasca Catering</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>960,000</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>2,140,000</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada North Environmental</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>40,000</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Nations Insurance</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>315,000</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kitsaki Management Limited Partnership</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>400,000</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Lights Foods</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>310,000</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>69,000</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keewatin Procon</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Ronge Industries</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Ronge Motor Hotel</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>750,000</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>110,000</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Ronge Wild Rice Corporation</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Resource Trucking</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>205,000</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>360,000</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The organically certified wild rice is sold primarily to markets throughout Europe and the USA. Organically certified wild mushrooms includes fresh, dried and frozen morel, chanterelle and matsutake mushrooms, the first two for the North American and European markets, and the third for the Japanese. The mushrooms are harvested in the boreal forests of Northern Saskatchewan. The mushrooms are certified organic by
Quality Assurance International and OCCP/Pro-Cert Canada Inc., as is the wild rice. The company expects to add organic wild berries to its product mix in the near future. Other products are under active consideration.

The people of the LRIB, through their Kitsaki Corporation, are an excellent example of the Aboriginal approach to development in action. Entrepreneurship – the identification of innovative opportunities and the creation of enterprises, products and services in response to these opportunities – lies at the heart of their economic development strategy. For most of their companies, Northern Lights Foods as an example, marketing is critical to success. The LRIB is operating at the entrepreneurship-innovation-marketing interface, and must do so on an ongoing basis to achieve its objectives including

1 greater control of activities on their traditional lands
2 an end to dependency through economic self-sufficiency
3 the preservation and strengthening of traditional values and the application of these in economic development and business activities
4 improved socioeconomic circumstance for individuals, families and communities.

6 Conclusions

As the Aboriginal people of Canada continue to expand their jurisdiction over their way of life and exercise their sovereignty they will do so in a way that incorporates their cultural and traditional values. Cree culture still revolves around the connection to *Askì* (land, mother Earth) and the relationship with family and community. The concept of Mother Earth in Cree worldview not only encompasses the land but also all of the animals, minerals, rocks, plant life and its interconnectedness. The Cree people seek sustainable development that utilises their TEK and respect for the land. They have found innovative ways of synergising their traditional economic systems with new capitalist economies. In doing so, they lead by example by ensuring sound environmental management and sustainable development as they integrate themselves into the capitalist economy.

References


A study of natural resource use by the Nehiyaw (Cree) First Nation


Morris, A. (1889) The Treaties of Canada with the Indian of Manitoba and the North-West Territories, Belfords, Clarke, Toronto.

Appendix

Athabasca Catering Limited Partnership (http://www.kitsaki.com/Ath.html) provides food service and janitorial work for a variety of northern mines, and in particular for Cameco Corporation. The company was started by Kitsaki and private entrepreneurs. The ownership base was subsequently expanded to include the First Nations of Black Lake, Fond du Lac, Hatchet Lake, and English River. The employees of Athabasca Catering have served millions of meals to hungry miners across the North, and the company has been able to pay tens of millions of dollars in wages to its employees who are primarily Aboriginal people of northern Saskatchewan. The seven-day-in, seven-day-out nature of the employment means that even people from remote communities can hold these jobs and still stay in their home community during their time out.

Canada North Environmental Services Limited Partnership (http://www.kitsaki.com/can.html) is an environmental consulting firm, specialising in training, environmental monitoring and community health issues. The company is 51% owned by Kitsaki and is in partnership with Connor Pacific Environmental Technologies Inc. The business involves Aboriginal people in environmental monitoring, and research activities related to industrial and resource developments and communicate with Aboriginal communities regarding the issues. We believe that a combination of traditional and scientific knowledge of the land and animals allows us to assess the environment and the impacts on it resulting from both natural and human activities. First Nation’s people understand
better than anyone that the environment must be sustained to empower the youth and leaders of the future.

The La Ronge Motor Hotel Limited Partnership (http://www.kitsaki.com/hot.html, http://www.lrhotel.sk.ca/) is the only full service hotel in La Ronge. It is newly renovated and offers convention and banquet facilities, in addition to 60 air-conditioned rooms with cable television, a new beer and wine store, coffee shop, dining room and lounge. The business is 100% owned by Kitsaki and is located on beautiful Lac La Ronge, across from the public beach and tennis courts. The staff pride themselves on their first class customer service. The La Ronge Motor Hotel has proven to be a fine training ground for LRIB members and other Aboriginal people entering the hospitality industry.

The hotel offers tourists a gateway to pristine northern Saskatchewan and access to beautiful scenery, great fishing, and adventure. We offer business travelers appropriate facilities including large boardrooms for private meetings and spacious convention facilities.

The LRIB, as a member of the Prince Albert Grand Council, is also an owner of three hotels in Prince Albert – The Prince Albert Inn, the Marquis Inn, and the Marlboro Hotel.

La Ronge Industries Ltd. (http://www.kitsaki.com/ind.html) is the largest grower of wild rice in western Canada. Wild rice is a gourmet, organic food that is popular in quality restaurants and kitchens around the world. The business is 51% owned by Kitsaki, and 49% by a corporation controlled by the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations. It controls wild rice leases scattered throughout hundreds of picturesque lakes in remote areas of northern Saskatchewan. The LRIB also has extensive wild rice areas on its reserve lands. The rice is harvested from a variety of shallow areas in lakes and rivers by driving airboats through these rice patches. This raw product is then processed in La Ronge at a state-of-the-art processing plant. The finest wild rice in the world is then marketed primarily to the United States, Europe, and elsewhere in Canada. The wild rice industry is supported by Kitsaki to provide an important seasonal economy for a number of Band members in one of the few industries that remains consistent with those who continue to live close to the land.

First Nations Insurance Services Ltd. (http://www.kitsaki.com/fir.html, http://www.firstnationsins.com/) offers group pension and benefits to First Nations, their institutions, and businesses. Started by Kitsaki, ownership is being transferred to the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations. Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation is also a minority partner. The company’s plan is tailored to suit First Nation people. While status Indians enjoy certain basic treaty benefits, the benefit plan offered by First Nations Insurance builds on these basic benefits and adds many additional important benefits. The First Nations Insurance pension plan puts First Nations people in charge of First Nations investments.

Keewatin/Procon Joint Venture (http://www.kitsaki.com/kee.html) has been established to provide contract mining services for both surface and underground mine sites. The company can also provide extensive related construction service. The joint venture partners of this business include Keewatin Mining Corporation, a company owned by Kitsaki, together with the First Nations of Black Lake, Hatchet Lake, and Fond du Lac. Keewatin owns 51% of the joint venture. While the other 49% is owned by Procon Mining and Tunnelling Ltd. Procon has extensive mining and tunnelling experience using a variety of mining techniques, both surface and underground, and has operated in a wide variety of soil conditions. Procon also operates an industrial construction division, as well as maintaining a division that can provide extensive access
to a great variety of heavy equipment. Keewatin Procon has successfully completed projects at McArthur River, McCLean Lake, and Cigar Lake. The joint venture was also involved in the Nisto Mine Decommissioning.

Kitsaki Meats Limited Partnership (http://www.kitsaki.com/kit.html) produces meat snacks sold across Canada under a variety of private labels. It is one of only a few federally inspected meat plants in Saskatchewan, and the only one in the North. The plant can smoke, process, and package a wide range of products including both natural and ground and formed jerky, in both individual sticks and bulk packaging. The company also sells its own Northern Lights line of meat snacks.

The retail meat division supplies fresh meat to a variety of customers across northern Saskatchewan. Better quality food at lower prices is one of the benefits that Kitsaki has brought to the North. It is also providing unique training opportunities, in a manufacturing environment, to many northern Aboriginal people. Kitsaki Meats is also a growing exporter of wild rice.

Northern Resource Trucking Limited Partnership (http://www.kitsaki.com/nor.html) serves Saskatchewan’s mining industry, hauling primarily to Uranium mines owned by Cameco Corporation, and Cogema Resources Inc. NRT has operated in a safe and efficient manner since 1986. Kitsaki and Trimac Transportation Services Ltd. started this business, and subsequently expanded the ownership base to include a number of Metis, Dene, and Cree Nations across northern Saskatchewan.

Our highly trained leased operators haul a variety of sensitive commodities, over challenging roads, and through intense weather conditions. In addition to quality service, NRT is mandated to select, train and develop northern and Aboriginal people in the industry. With offices in Saskatoon and La Ronge, NRT runs the biggest equipment allowed in Saskatchewan. NRT is a prime example of what can be achieved through cooperation between the mining industry, and Aboriginal business.

Wapawekka Lumber Limited Partnership (http://www.kitsaki.com/wap.html) is a modern technology sawmill located north of Prince Albert. The $22.5 million sawmill processes small diameter logs into lumber. Started in 1999, the business brings Kitsaki together with Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation, Montreal Lake Cree Nation, and Weyerhaeuser Canada. The business has already established itself as an extremely safe, world class sawmill based on a unique partnership and a diverse, talented work force. Wapawekka Lumber is a unique partnership between the Woodland Cree and Weyerhaeuser, creating higher value quality products from small diameter logs, while providing employees with ongoing growth and career opportunities. The highly skilled, predominately Aboriginal work force, have been trained in a variety of areas including, computers, fire and safety, work systems, cultural awareness, principles of teamwork, W.H.M.I.S., and occupational health and safety.

Pihkan Aský/Nîh Soreldhen Joint Venture (http://www.kitsaki.com/pih.html) has been formed by four, highly skilled partners with unique experience and perspective in the important field of environmental remediation. Athabasca Economic Development and Training Corporation, Canada North Environmental Services Limited Partnership, Clifton Associates Ltd. and Keewatin/Procon Joint Venture share a vision for the development of the North. The people of northern Saskatchewan will possess the means to address their goals and aspirations for their communities, Aboriginal authorities and industry will work together to promote the social and economic development of the North.