This is Chapter XIX, “James Bay Hydroelectric Project” from the book **Three Hundred Years in Thirty: Memoir of Transition with the Cree Indians of Lake Mistassini** by Nicholas Smith. The book was published by Polar Bear & Company, P.O. Box 311, Solon, ME 04979 www.polarbearandco.com in 2011.

In his last years while living in Brunswick, Maine, Nick was a member of Friends of Merrymeeting Bay.

FOMB Chair Ed Friedman paddled with the Mistassini Cree in this area for 5 weeks in 1970 and knows the Hydro Quebec projects to be unmitigated disasters for the native peoples and environment of central and northern Quebec and the waters and marine life they feed, namely James and Hudson Bay and the Gulf of Maine. Please consider this in the mad rush to electrify. Where is your electricity coming from and at what true costs? Nicks insights in the excerpted chapter are spot on.

"In his memoir, Nicholas Smith has done something rarely experienced by others in recent times. Because of his deep interest in the original citizens of North America, particularly the northern Cree of Quebec, he has gone and lived among them, entering with intense interest and total commitment to their ancient way of life. The results of this unique experience he shares with us in this insightful and fascinating account. Dr. Smith takes the reader right into the heart of the Canadian wilderness to dwell with the Mistassini and Waswanipi Cree as they go about their life as entrepreneurs of the Hudson's Bay Company. In the course of this intriguing book we are introduced to a way of life that molded and shaped the Mistassini and Waswanipi Cree into a proud, wise, and resolute First Nations people with a most colourful history and attachment to the exciting days of the fur trade. Many individuals play a significant role in the story, among them, Hudson's Company officers, missionary clergy, and notable Cree leaders.This is an engrossing book to be enjoyed by all who travel its pages. It is also an important historical document to be treasured by the northern Cree as a vivid portrayal and recollection of their old way of life and history.The story is well told by a good man who greatly admired and esteemed them.—James Scanlon, Sometime “inlander,” Formerly Archdeacon of James Bay

XIX

James Bay Hydroelectric Project

Here's Why

by D. C. Butterfield[1]

Here's to the deer and the caribou
To the moose and the mighty bear
I hate to think we'd be on the brink
If the critters and creatures weren't there,
And here's to the stars and the Milky Way
To the sun and the "man in the moon"
I can only hope that we learn to cope
While the time is so opportune,

And here's to the forest and fountains
To the rills and the rivers and lakes
To the whales in the waters, and all the otters
And the beauty a sunset makes,
Here's to the fir and maple and the mighty oak
And to the mountains that touch the sky
I can only plead that we must succeed
And avoid the obvious . . . why!

Here's *not* to the places of people and power
.Of consumers and credit and cash
As they glom and gore for always "More!"
While turning our planet to ash!

The James Bay Hydroelectric Project was the Quebec provincial government's best-kept secret. The local people involved in the project knew little about the preliminary activity, such as cutting lines and surveying for the huge project. The Indians hired for the actual line cutting, for the most part, did not know the purpose of their work. I could not help but see the preliminary work of mapping and surveying the territory. Although I did not know the full scope of the project, I was aware that it was another subarctic hydroelectric project. It seemed to me that all the nations having some subarctic land were destroying this narrow ecological band with their destructive hydro. I noted that environmentalists hearing word of the immense hydroelectric plan shrugged it off as a tall tale. The James Bay Hydroelectric Project is much too big and detailed to go into in depth here. It greatly affected the Mistassini Cree and ended the fur trade as it had operated in their lives for more than three centuries.

In 1970 most of the area was officially labeled as "unmapped." In far-off Quebec City and Montreal the politicians' images of wilderness resembled wasteland having little value waiting for development. Hydro-Québec (a government-owned corporation) drew up a large plan to generate electricity from the power of the impressive waterfalls on the five large rivers flowing into James Bay. This energy resource made it possible to export electricity to New York City and other places. Hydro-Québec hired all kinds of scientists to prove that the plan would not be harmful to the fauna nor upset the environment. The reports claimed to prove that hydroelectric power is the cleanest energy source on earth.

The project leaders were so confident that their scientists, most of whom had never been in the territory before, would give the project a five-star approval. Construction even began several years before all the scientific reports were completed. The project costs were almost double the estimates. Hydro-Québec began the project with no fanfare or announcements to the media about it. It was kept very secret until the generators were ready to be turned on.

Indian concepts of land are quite different from those of the white man. The land supports all life. If one harms the land, all life on that land will be harmed. The hunters know that they are just a small part of the total life that relies on their existence from the land. If a hunter desecrates or mistreats the land or the life on the land he, too, will be affected. The towns of Chapais and Chibougamau were to the Indians' examples of the truth of that hypothesis.

Indians pointed out to me their sacred family burial places. I realized

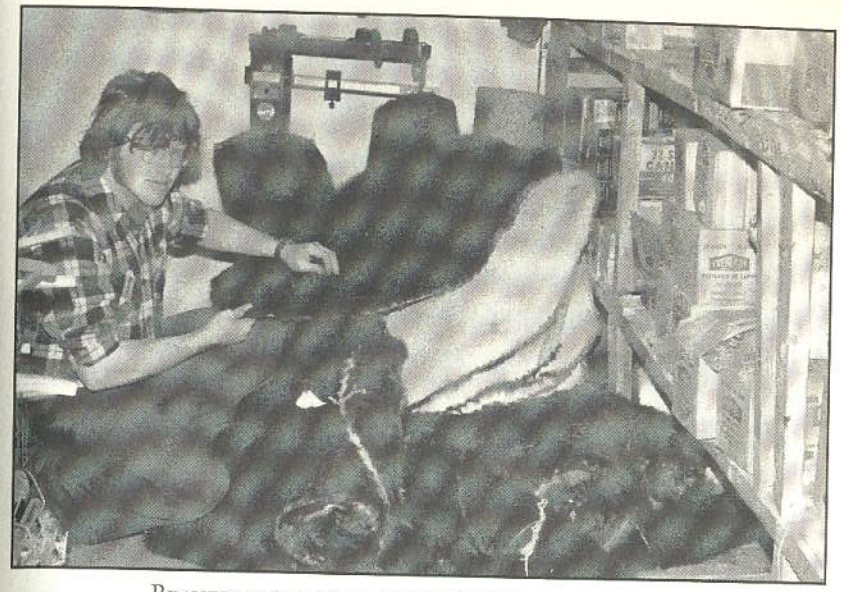
that these sacred places would soon be covered by water. It seemed to me that the fact that water would cover the land containing their family graves was not a reality to them. It was customary for families to visit these sites to show respect for their forebears by leaving tobacco. There was no plan or thought to save these remains from the flooding. There would be no place for the Indians to go to visit and venerate those who had gone to the other side. Hydro-Québec distributed a brief summary of the project and plans written in Cree to the Indians throughout the James Bay area. This included maps of the anticipated flooding at the Mistassini village. As an unintended consequence, the James Bay Project brought the bands together, strengthening their ties. All the chiefs met at a James Bay site to discuss the project. They were unified against the project. They reacted by meeting on a beach, building a big fire, and burning all the documents, thinking that was a significant way to show their disapproval and terminate the project. Although the burning of the documents signaled the James Bay Indians' unified disapproval of the project, their opinion did not affect the politicians who saw the project as their economic destiny.

Although the Indians disliked the James Bay Project, their innate humor comes through in the example of this gibe, following the Quebec bulldozers invading the Mistassini lands and destroying their hunting territories, although no agreements had been made about the land. Indian Commissioner: "You know, Chief, the Great White Father has sent me down to speak to you. You know the white man loves his red brother."

"Ugh!" replied the chief, "white man love very ground Injun walk on."

The James Bay Project stimulated both younger and older men, who had tried other means of making a living, to return to the Mistassini hunting lifestyle. There was a steady increase in the number of winter hunting camps. Glen Speers (the HBC manager), band elders, and Anglican missionaries provided the following statistics.

Winter	No. of Camps
1969–70	42
1970–71	45
1971–72	51
1972–73	57
1973–74	62
1974–75	70
1975–76	77
1976–77	84



BEAVER SKINS TO BE SENT TO THE FUR AUCTIONS

The people were going back to the land, their heritage. Their image and definition of a Mistassini man was that of an extraordinary, strong, rugged hunter who could defy the worst elements that nature could throw at him. The population was also increasing. It must be remembered that the tabulation included what were formerly the separate posts of Nemaska, Nemiskau, Neoskweskau, Nichikun, Kaniapiskau, and Chibougamau. In 1952 the population of these groups together totaled 646.[2] By 1970, eighteen years later, the figure had more than doubled to 1,329, according to the band census. These counts were probably low because they lacked a good communication system, and no one actually traveled from camp to camp for specific census figures.

In 1971 Glen Speers made up an impressive 5,600 bundles of Mistassini beaver skins to send to the fur auctions. The Mistassini were on a tightrope balancing act, trying to maintain sufficient food animals in their territory for their future, yet harvesting an adequate number for a healthy lifestyle. Every year more sportsmen were flying into the camps, where they were practically guaranteed a caribou or moose.

In 1972 the Mistassini in the fifty-seven hunting camps depending on wild food killed an average of only two and seven-eighths moose per camp and three and a half caribou per camp.

Unfortunately, I could not obtain the number of game animals killed by sportsmen in the area. The same year, sixty-eight Waswanipi families

harvested one hundred and five moose, providing an average of less than two moose per family. Sportsmen killed thirty-three moose in the Waswanipi territory, approximately a third of what the inhabitants of the area killed in a year. Such statistics alarm the Indian who relies on these animals for food. Small animals and fish make up much more of the Indians' food than the large animals do. The quota system for beaver has provided an ample number of pelts harvested each year to meet the hunters' store needs. Many men feel that a similar quota system should be imposed on the large game animals to maintain the balance of food animals.

The Mistassini are very much aware that as white men move into an area, the animals disappear rapidly. There was a saying among the Cree that, "You can tell an American because he will kill all he can and take as much with him as he can; you can tell a Canadian because he will kill all he can and eat it there." The Indians showed much concern toward the changes that were soon to occur in their land. It was discovered that mercury levels peak in newly created water systems about ten years after they are created. The inhabitants can no longer rely on the new waterways as a safe food source for at least ten years or perhaps longer. These new threats have forced the change to a money economy from the beaver economy.

The white freshwater landlocked seals of Ungava were one of the area's greatest secrets and mysteries. Indians and Eskimos have long known about them. A. P. Low's report states that he saw three white seals and that Indians told him that thirty were harvested a year. Ornithologist Clyde Todd heard stories about them while studying Ungava birds in 1935. On his advice in 1938 ornithologists Arthur C. Twomey and Kenneth Doutt[3] of Pittsburgh's Carnegie Museum included in their Canadian Government grant application funding to search for and procure a freshwater white seal specimen in Ungava. With the help of James Bay Eskimo and Cree Indian guides, the rare freshwater white seals were observed and a specimen taken to the Pittsburgh Pennsylvania Museum of Natural History for further museum study. After lengthy research, this rare mammal was finally, officially recognized as a distinct species in 2008.

The Mistassini bush people whom I knew in the 1970s and 1980s had little changed from the guides that Dr. Arthur Twomey and Dr. J. K. Doutt employed in 1938 on their expedition to the Seal Lakes, more than three hundred miles north of Mistassini. I have tried to portray these Indians who, although they killed animals for food, were not butchers of

animals or of people. Their killing practices were a solemn rite for the sustaining of life, and not to be abused. The images of these people are not to be confused with the "Hollywood" interpretation.

There were times when the ornithologists Doutt and Twomey could not continue their trek to the white seal lakes. They usually simply rested and talked. One gray, lonely day, with the world silent and barren all about, Doutt and Twomey crouched near the blaze, waiting for the tea water to boil, and discussed the Japanese invasion of China. Their earnest tones and intent faces brought the curious Indians about them in a few moments. Such earnest discussions invoked the following conversation.

> "What are they saying?" the men asked George (the head guide).
>
> "We are speaking of war," we told George to answer. But George thought for a while and then finally admitted that he knew no word for war in the Indian language.
>
> "Describe it then," we said. "Didn't these Indians ever fight one another?"
>
> "No," said George, "I don't think so.
>
> "Men divide into groups," George told them, translating for us as he went along. "They are enemies. They have guns more terrible than any you can imagine. They shoot off hilltops like this one (pointing) without any trouble. They kill hundreds of men with only one loud shot!" By this time the astonishment and shock of the natives was plain to be seen.
>
> "Do white men shoot each other as we shoot the seal?" asked one of the Ruperts finally, as though he couldn't believe it. When George answered yes, they all looked at each other obviously excited.
>
> Through the afternoon that followed, George told us, the Indians went on discussing this strange thing . . . And this was not the only illustration we had of the high regard which the Ungava Indians have for human life . . . they certainly are unwilling to kill.[4]

Slowly it became apparent that there were too many outside forces pressuring their world. The Mistassini had lived a life adapting to the fur traders' rules; now they realized that if they were to continue living on their land, they must adapt to a new order of things. Now some of these stalwart people regulate the water of the newly created dam world and others operate huge machines. They have found a new niche in life, just as

the Iroquois steel bridge builders did. They will continue to live on their land, their heritage. Let us hope that the Quebec Government will not only listen to these people of peace but work to give them sovereignty within their province and a life of respect and dignity.

Before 1970, targets were set on the ground to photograph the unmapped Mistassini territory from the air, a modern mapmaking procedure. The Indians who were hired to cut lines were not told the purpose of their work, but they found that it was an attractive source of income. It soon became apparent to the tribal leaders that the Indian workers, now looked upon as being rich, were aiding a project that would break up the Indian territory and disrupt the Indian way of life. Tribal leaders dissuaded their people from working on the project. They often referred to those who continued to work for the project as traitors.

Well-paid Quebec workmen came unannounced, without asking permission, to arrogate the land, under the assumption that they were the true owners. The Mistassini viewed them as the destroyers of the territory, the inhabitants' source of food and the basis for their way of life. It was a dispossession of land similar to the sending of the Acadians to Louisiana. The Indians decided that they would fight for their lands in the white man's way, in the courts. A people who had no legal training and limited knowledge of the system took a stand in the Quebec provincial court, which follows the French legal system.

The tone of the provincial justices was that electric power was more important to the province than the hunting rights providing subsistence food for Indians. For the people who had never been in the area or had no intention of going to the area, the argument seemed to make sense. Unfortunately there were very few people who understood the economics or the Indians' coexistent system with the land. The strangers invading the territory were the descendants of those who had come to the New World three centuries ago, having continuously redeveloped their land but still in need of a proper economic base. They were now prepared to eradicate an ongoing economy that had proved itself for well more than three hundred years. Quebec political leaders saw the development of the primeval Mistassini territory as an answer for an economic base for the future of the province.

The Mistassini and Waswanipi communities hired a lawyer in an attempt to gain an injunction against the James Bay Project. The hearings began in the fall of 1972 and continued into the spring of 1973, the longest injunction hearings in the history of Canada. Hydro-Québec continued work throughout the hearings. Months went by while the

Indians waited for a verdict. Work continued on the James Bay Project while the Indians were waiting for a decision. No attempt was made to stop the work, as if the administrators knew that they would win the case. Finally in November the judge decided in favor of the Indians. All across Canada, Indians celebrated an Indian victory. But it was short-lived.

Again, Indians had evidence that work had never completely terminated. In less than a week, three higher judges overruled the decision and decided in favor of the James Bay Hydro Project. The Indians decided to appeal. It was no surprise that work continued. The Indians said that if the work continued at its present rate, some major dams would be so far along that the damage to the land would be irreversible. The courts quickly turned down the Indians' appeal. The Indians spent much tribal money in their effort to fight fairly in the court system. The Indians could feel proud that they had planned their case and presented it very well. But the fact that they came closer to winning against the Quebec Government than any Indians had in a Canadian Government case before them was of little consolation. The Indians received little economic benefit from the project. The workers left a shattered land with their high earnings to spend elsewhere.

No alternative plan for the loss of land or way of life was offered the Indians. The Indians were positive that the court was not fair to them. The Indians' attitude toward all white men changed, and they became more unified against the white man than ever before. Finally the province offered payments to the hunters, to be given between Christmas and New Year's each year. The Indians had to be present in the village to receive their stipend. This was another example of how little the government knew about the Mistassini territory.

The managers of the trading posts on the St. Lawrence River had always offered their trappers a big party between Christmas and New Year's Day. Their Indians came in with furs, traded, and enjoyed partying and dancing before returning to their trap lines. The Mistassini Christmas-New Year's period produced the finest furs, while the St. Lawrence River trappers took the finest furs after New Year's. (Since the Mistassini area is colder earlier, the animals' winter coat comes in earlier than in the St. Lawrence River area.) Therefore, the Mistassini trappers preferred to remain at their camps, but they were forced to return at holiday time to receive the provincial payments due them. Those who did not appear at the village received no provincial payments. Although it was their prime trapping season, Mistassini trappers were forced to return from the trap lines during the Christmas-through-New Year's period to receive their

government money. The condition of furs declined as winter progressed. As the season passed, many animals engaged in fights resulting in wounds that damaged their pelts. The trappers were in the habit of remaining at the trap lines during that period.

Caribou were gathering to make their traditional crossing of the La Grande River when the floodgates were opened for the first time. The leading caribou started to cross the river and were swept away by the increased force of the swift current. The caribou had not the slightest hint of the vastly increased intensity of the flowage. The lead caribou jumped into the river and was quickly swept away as were his trusting followers. The exact magnitude of the slaughter was unknown. It was obvious that the incident could not be ignored. An early media report stated that 650 caribou were drowned. Later estimates were more than double that figure. The Indians were notified of the incident and were invited to salvage what they could from the carcasses. Unknown numbers of hibernating bears in their dens and beaver in their houses drowned and could not be salvaged as the water rose in the reservoir. There were no limits on the number of animals the project could kill, but game wardens had been ready to arrest Indians on the slightest suspicion of breaking the white man's law. I wondered how many New Yorkers were enjoying reading their Audubon or Sierra Club publications by a lamp lit by electricity made available from a Quebec grid due to the increased electricity produced for Quebec from hydro dams at LG2 on the La Grande River in the heart of the Mistassini territory. A volunteer at the Bowdoin College Arctic Museum commented that we can't change our ways. She was glad that the needed electricity was produced "up there, not on Maine's wild rivers."

The independent fur trader who resided at Mistassini, Emmet McLeod, had as much experience and knowledge of Mistassini beaver as Glen Speers did. The trappers had been keeping records of not only the animals that they killed in their territories, but the number that they saw. Emmet kept a tabulation of the numbers and sent a copy to the Department of Conservation in Quebec City each year. In January 1974, Emmet estimated that there were 13,000 beaver lodges containing 60,000 to 65,000 beaver within the 60,000 square mile Mistassini territory. There were an average of 6,500 beaver harvested each year. The largest annual harvest of beaver in his records was 9,500.

A trapping control system was developed. Each beaver skin must have a tag. Only a tagged skin could legally be sold. An untagged beaver skin had no market value. Each headman of a territory received a certain

number of tags based on a percentage of the number of beaver that he estimated were in his territory the previous year.

Both Emmet McLeod and Glen Speers claimed that the tags worked well and were reliable; otherwise there would not be a fairly consistent harvest of mature beaver each year. If the skins of young beaver outnumbered the mature, it would be a sign that the beaver were beginning to disappear. All the signs showed that the beaver populations were healthy, in spite of more than three hundred years of harvesting them for the fur trade.

Hydro-Québec hired Garrett C. Clough, biology professor at the University of Rhode Island, to make a survey of beaver in the La Grande River watershed. His survey found 0.75 beaver per square mile, concluding that it was a rather small population of little concern to the project. Although the Indian's twenty years of statistics were available in the Quebec Department of Conservation, they were considered too unreliable to have any significance. A scientist's opinion was considered of much higher value than that of the fur traders or trappers who had been in the area for more than thirty years and whose livelihoods depended on furs.

After the first huge reservoir was filled, the southern migration route of waterfowl changed. The rich feeding ground at the mouth of the river had been completely washed out with all its food resources on which much wildlife depended, from very minute lower forms to whales. The food supply for migrating snow geese disappeared; they somehow discovered the rich farmland near Montreal, where they had been considered rare, as a substitute source of food. It seemed that the snow geese now came to haunt the Montreal farmers in revenge against those who had obliterated their northern food resources! Retribution, I'm sure!

Rich food resources at river mouths, the base of food chains, had been washed away, eventually damaging the North Atlantic fishing banks. It was known that these river mouths always attracted many species of fish to spawn and then return to the Atlantic. After the opening of the La Grande River Dam, the loss of a nourishing fish resource in James Bay, with food-chain links to the fish in the Atlantic, may be little known but could be a factor to the dwindling Atlantic fish supply now blamed on over-fishing. It is possible that the hydro project in western Quebec that was to stimulate the province's economy could be an impediment to the important fishing economy of people of eastern Quebec, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and the New England coast.

On one visit to Mistassini, I was surprised to see a TV antenna on

almost every house. I marveled that the village now had electricity. Then I learned that the hydroelectric project administrators had still not planned to supply the Mistassini people with electricity! Their stated plan was to ship the electricity produced on the Mistassini territory to New York City, Mistassini government buildings, to the school, Hudson's Bay Company, and the church buildings. Electricity for Indian housing at Mistassini was not included in the plan. As a protest, almost everyone attached a TV antenna to his roof. It was a silent but very visual protest that brought exclamations of, "Oh, you have TV up here!" The visual protest brought the desired result: electricity to the Indian homes.

There was no way to harvest the drowned black spruce of the virgin forests in the roadless areas of the projected reservoir. The plan was to leave the drowned trees untouched to rot in the water. A year or two later the scientists discovered that the rotting spruce left in the reservoir areas would cause the water to become toxic and would kill or poison all wildlife that lived in the water or came to drink it. The toxic condition would last at least eighty years before the water would again be potable. Something had to be done! Two large dredge-style barges were constructed. Huge boilers were on the decks. Crews worked day and night hauling the trees aboard and burning them. Acrid smoke filled the air for many days The smoke covered many miles and heavily veiled the sun, creating similar conditions to a long drawn-out period of overcast days.

I had seen the destruction caused by the New Brunswick Power Company's dam project on the St. John River, once a magnificent waterway and home to many species of fish and other life. Turning a meandering river into a reservoir destroyed the Atlantic salmon and sturgeon spawning beds. The greatly magnified current from the dam quickly swept the fish-nesting areas away, as well as the minute life that are the rich food resources for the food chains upon which so much wildlife depends. The dams created electric power but did not provide a cheap source of energy to attract big business to the area. Labrador's Churchill Falls, with a drop of 245 feet, was seen as a productive hydro project. The province ignored the rights of the Native people and has never negotiated with them for the use of the land. The Churchill Falls Dam that was to bring renewed life to Newfoundland has not yet transformed that province to one of great prosperity. Quebec is Newfoundland's biggest customer. The project is a notable engineering event. However, it was extremely destructive to large areas of natural settings that attracted a wide variety of wildlife, food that was a wonderful resource to feed the native people.

In 1967 Arthur Sorensen contacted me regarding a trip to Labrador's Churchill Falls. I wanted to photograph this unique, magnificent natural feature and readily agreed to take him there. At the end of May, with our canoe tied to the roof, we drove to Seven Islands on the north shore of the St. Lawrence River. There was still snow on the ground and more coming down. We were told of a road from Esker to Churchill Falls. We left the car and canoe at the railroad station and boarded the train for Esker. The Quebec North Shore and Labrador Railway connected Seven Islands with Schefferville. The train was composed primarily of empty ore cars with two passenger cars attached to the rear and followed a river with mountains on either side. Many spectacular, icy waterfalls descended from great heights. Several men were getting off at Esker. A man checked off their names as they jumped off into the snow. He did not have our names and told us to return to the train and get off at Schefferville. I told the checker that we wished to see and photograph Churchill Falls, one of the highest waterfalls in the world. He replied that we would have to obtain permission from Joe Smallwood, the prime minister of Newfoundland. He continued, "How do we know that you are not Arab spies coming to blow up the falls, so that Egypt will retain the honor of having the largest dam in the world?" I didn't see any telephones attached to any trees from which to call the prime minister. We made a hurried decision to disembark, go around the rear of the train and on into the bush. When we found a place that was easy to hide our camp, we stopped and spent two weeks roaming around central Labrador. Ironically, several years later I was invited to a New Year's party in Gananoque, Ontario, where I was introduced to the recently retired energy minister of Newfoundland. He was interested in hearing my story and said that he would gladly have given us the needed permission, since the government had only one photograph of Churchill Falls before the water was diverted to the Newfoundland and Labrador Hydro project.

The great dam projects spread across the subarctic. Scientists must examine these areas to determine if the destruction has been worth the gain. It appears that some third-world hydro projects are created to prove that their engineers also can construct gigantic projects. Will we ever know the true destruction of water life, plants and trees? The transforming of large areas of dry land into huge reservoirs, and the draining of rivers and lakes, are major factors of our global warming. Scientists must become concerned about the changes in landscapes, to guarantee that such projects do not result in unexpected detrimental changes that could be devastating to us, outweighing the benefits of the

dams. Today's major agrarian concern is that the world is not producing sufficient food to feed everyone. The scientists must find new, harmless sources of energy. It is not a case of "we are not going to change, but I am glad they are doing it up there." There must be more concern about the adverse effects of projects to people beyond the limits of the project. Wind and water currents carry pollutants across international boundaries.

The populations living in the subarctic around the world are usually small, often so low in number as to be considered insignificant; the inhabitants do not have to be informed about the plans that will change their land, environment, and way of life. In spite of the government's shameful treatment of them, the Mistassini people have shown great versatility in reacting to the situation. The Mistassini saw the Earth as the precious Mother, providing sustenance for all life. Matthew Iserhoff stated to me that: "God gave the Indians the land to protect, the white people did not know the value of the land and were ravaging it, and the land would no longer be fit for animals. The Indians had to protect the land, since the white people did not know enough to do so. White people will thank the Indians in years to come."

Indian oral history emphasizes that Indians are the caretakers of land conceived by their creator for a hunting territory. Animals were created for their use, as long as there was no abuse. Nature and the great outdoors always provided new experiences. The responsibility that had been their predecessors' was always passed on to an ever-present younger generation. In return almost all their necessities would be provided. It was a life that had not changed. Over the years Hudson's Bay Company managers introduced improved, new gear that made the hunter's life easier, contributing to hunting and trapping success. The usual result was additional furs for the HBC traders.

XX

Winter Bush Life: Philip's Camp

The flight from Mistassini to Philip Voyageur's camp, about one hundred miles north, took about an hour. From the air, the land had an uninviting, rugged wilderness appearance of snow-covered rivers, lakes, and rolling hills. Several years earlier a James Bay Hydroelectric Project helicopter was flying some men to a work site, probably on about the same flight path my pilot was following. A typical subarctic, whiteout blizzard suddenly blew up without warning. The helicopter slammed into an unseen hill. Philip's camp was just over the next hill. Philip's family was doing chores inside the protected wall of their tent and heard the crash above the shrieking storm. In spite of the strong gusts blending the new snow with the old, causing whiteout conditions, Philip knew that he had to go out to investigate and see what he could do for the unlucky travelers who had tried to defy the storm by flying into it. He and his son quickly put on their heavy jackets and grabbed a large coil of rope, tying themselves together so that they would not become separated. The visibility was so poor and the wind so strong that the men, bent over for protection from the biting storm, could not see more than two feet ahead. It was hard going and difficult to hear one another. They could see almost nothing. They made little headway. They fought their way forward foot by foot. Fighting the storm was extremely tiring. Swirling snow erased their trail in no time. They decided that the conditions were so hazardous that for their own safety they should return to their tent and wait until the storm abated.

The weather cleared during the night. The men rose early to set out on their rescue mission. It did not take long to find the downed craft less than a half mile from their camp. The search team looked inside the helicopter but found no one. Then they searched around the craft but still found no trace of anyone. The wind would have obliterated any tracks