

Water Ethics:

James Bay Cree youth and their relationship with water

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Context

WATER ETHICS

- Rapidly gaining attention due to increasing economic interest in water, concerns about water quality, and growing political tensions associated with cross-cultural and trans-boundary water issues (Barlow, 2013; Chamberlain, 2008; Desbiens, 2007; Linton, 2010);
- There is a need to better understand the water ethics held by different cultures to inform more sustainable water practices and water management (Brown & Schmidt, 2010; Feldman, 1995);
- The dominant Canadian water ethic rooted in Western Ethics and classified as “a one-way relationship that is out of balance and ultimately destructive and unsustainable” (Sandford & Phare, 2011, p.6-7);
- Western knowledge holders could deepen their collective understanding of, and appreciation for, water by learning from Indigenous Knowledge related to water (Sandford & Phare, 2011).

YOUTH AND WATER

- Groups of youth are activating and organizing to address today's water issues and are requesting to participate in international and local water leadership (World Youth Parliament for Water, 2014).

RESEARCH WITH YOUTH

- Participating in research benefits youth (Irizarry & Brown, 2013) as well as the practice of research itself (Altrichter & Posch, 2009);
- Flexible and innovative methods (Heath & Walker, 2011) including e-participation (Sharpe, 2011) are effective for research with youth, and mixed methods are commonly used (Heath & Walker, 2011);
- There is a gap in existing research related to youth and water, and considering that youth are the inheritors of the planet and its water, their perspectives and ethics are important to inform fields of knowledge related to water.

CREE YOUTH IN WEMINDJI, EASTERN JAMES BAY, NORTHERN QUEBEC

- Interested in canoeing, swimming, snowshoeing, fishing (year round), and other water-related activities;
- Exposed to both traditional Cree practices as well as mainstream Western institutions and systems;
- Community bordered by water on two sides and key adults are working to establish a marine protected area;
- Exposed to tensions and negotiations with Hydro Quebec related to nearby large hydroelectric dams;
- Benefit financially from hydro dams;
- Exposed to activist Indigenous role models;
- Local youth centre interested in water research.



Canoe Frame METHODOLOGY, APPROACH

Case study methodology (Yin, 2009) is “an empirical inquiry that... investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when... the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2009, p. 18). Both water and the relationship with water act as both the phenomenon and the context (considering eco-socio-political-spiritual contexts). *Case study research* allows for nuances and complexities which are significant to this research. The principles of *case study research* are congruent with Indigenous methodologies which are based on building connections and fostering links and relations (Hart, 2007; Kovach, 2010; Wilson, 2008).

Furthermore, the *Ecosystem approach* (Sharpe, 2011) is a model used in research with youth that promotes flexibility, innovation, and “places equal emphasis on process and outcome” where “research [is] fun and provide[s] opportunities for creative and critical thinking” (p.167). While working with youth, I “design[ed] methods that resonate with or can be easily transferred into their lives” (Sharpe, 2011, p.173).

Canoe Steering RESEARCH QUESTION

What factors contribute to the relationship James Bay Cree youth have with water?

Canoe Paddlers RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Cree youth from Wemindji, Northern Quebec



Paddles (Connection to Water and Project Focus) PROJECT ACTIVITIES

- Participant Observation and *Observant Participation* (Schmuck, 2006) during a canoe and a snowshoe expedition (reflecting on water while on the water) in addition to other community events;
- Semi-structured interviews with youth as well as with key adults who work with youth and/or water;
- Visual methods (Heath & Walker, 2011; Snee, 2011) through activities that included watching videos about water and reacting to them.

Rocks CONSIDERATIONS

Many Indigenous Peoples' ontologies include the idea that it is not the things that are important but rather our relationships with those things (Wilson, 2008). HOW we navigate the rapids around the rocks is important. As a Researcher I must acknowledge Canada's colonial context and its effect on Indigenous Peoples and on knowledge systems. I must do the *relational work* (Kovach, 2010) and situate research participants including myself in a broader socio-political context.

Canoe Bow RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- Increase Cree youth engagement and capacity related to water;
- Inform the literature related to Water Ethics, water governance and the relationship people have with water.

The James Bay Cree Water Ethic

FROM THE GRAND COUNCIL OF THE CREES (1999, p.91)

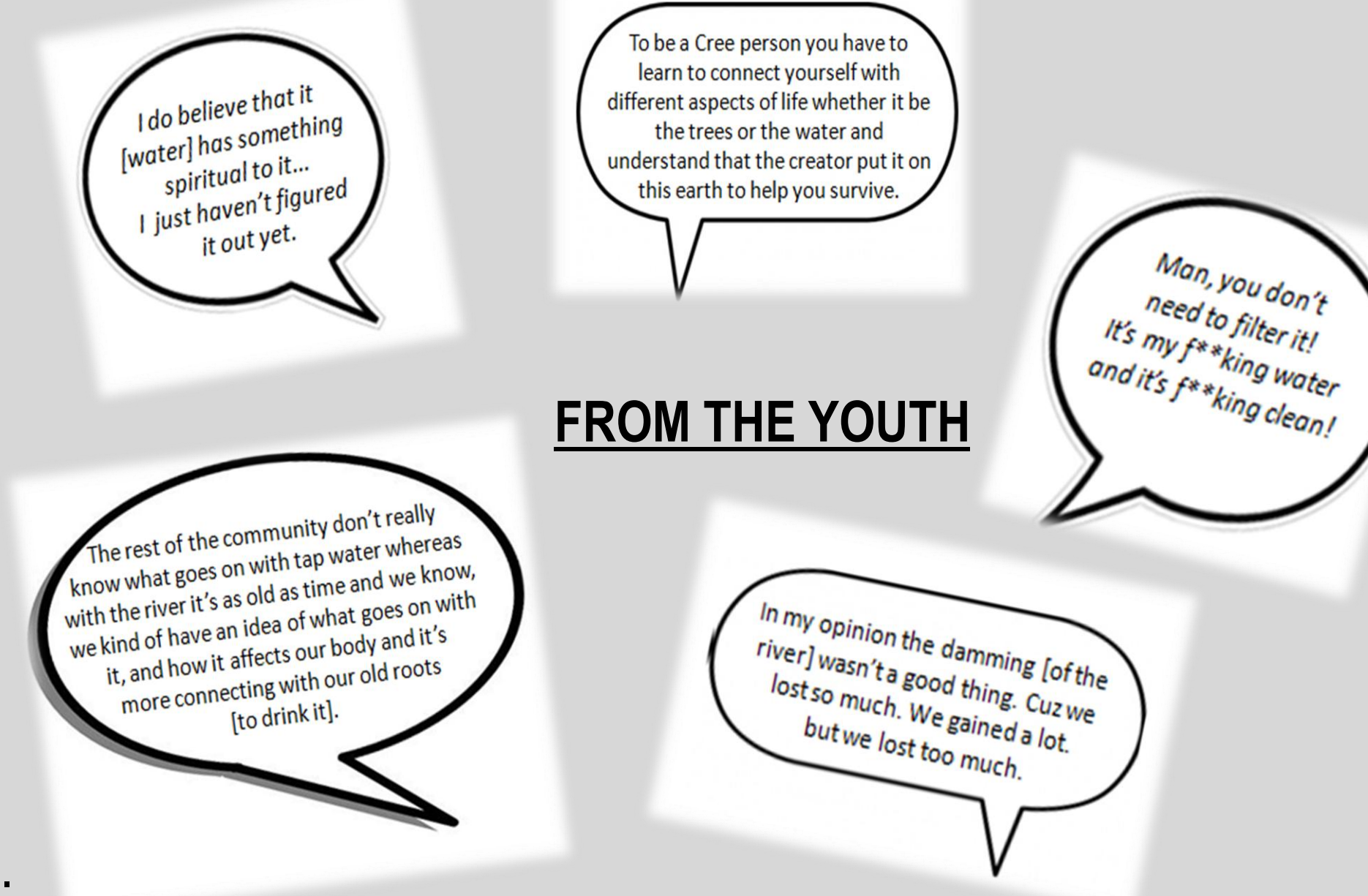
“*Neebee* [water] is **vital to the well-being** of our traditional territory and its flora and fauna, and to the integrity of our... environment **as a whole**. Since we view **ourselves as an integral part of our natural environment**, the importance of *neebée* to us has profound and diverse dimensions.”



FROM THE ELDERS

The above *Core Values Diagram* was created by Wemindji Cree Elders to display the values that compose their worldview. The concepts are described by the Chief of the community as being “**all interconnected and interdependent**” (Stocek, 2013).

FROM THE YOUTH



Findings

CREE YOUTH WATER ETHIC

- Complex and conflicted; combined mesh of Indigenous traditional ethics with Western ethics;
- Rooted in webs of traditional cultural experiences surviving on the land, combined with realities of living in settled communities constantly linked to modern technologies, infrastructures and institutions;
- Recognizes water has power to destroy and sustain us;
- Aware that a vast world of life unfamiliar to humans lives underwater;
- Cultural identity is strongly linked to water;
- Strong sense of stewardship for water on their family hunting grounds and strong sense of respect / ‘Creespect’ for water;
- Relate consciously with water principally in ways that they use it (drinking it, showering in it, fishing in it, etc.);
- Display a diversity of options/feelings related to using water for economic benefit.
- Significant influences include: Drinking water, Technology and indoor comforts, Water-related activities, Pop culture, Indigenous entertainment role models, Local youth centre, Pan-Indigenous cultural reappropriation movement, Peer influence, Wage-work, Survival and cultural connections with the land, Elders and Cree Knowledge, Cultural stories / legends, ‘Creespect’, School and home, and Religion and spirituality.

CHALLENGES

- Many Cree legends and traditional contexts related to water were “lost because of residential schools when our grandparents weren’t allowed to talk in Cree so they didn’t tell anyone the stories they knew”;
- Cree youth are not involved in community consultations regarding local and regional water issues;
- Cree youth generally have a negative or impartial reputation among the adults and are not viewed as holding significant leadership capacities.

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