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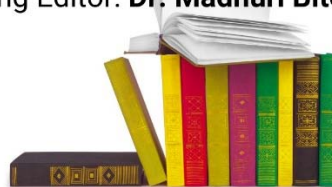
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The Fluvial Breach

Dr. Emily Bilman

Tall grasses grazed the air while the fog-patches were dissipated temporarily by the spring breeze. The musk-filled smell of petrichor blown in from the plains refreshed the ombudsman, Aiken McCormick. He was greeted by John Dewey, the head of the Council of Elders, in Saskatchewan airport. John was a tall, tanned, and muscular man with ebony black hair. Full of confidence, he greeted Aiken with a firm and candid handshake which put Aiken at ease. The elder introduced himself as “Mahikan” meaning “wolf” in the Cree language: “Welcome to Saskatchewan which means “the flow of the river” in Cree. You are here to re-establish the flowing of our river that is blocked by upstream sediment and pollution.”

John invited Aiken to his house for dinner that night. Dinner consisted of fried sturgeon with potatoes, cabbage salad, and bannock, the national pita-bread. Once around the table, Aiken was shocked to see Stan, their twelve-year old son, an obese boy of about 210 pounds, struggling to come down the stairs to join them. When Aiken addressed him and asked him how he felt, Stan said the effort on the stairs had almost left him breathless and continued:

“When I had diabetes a year ago, I started to gain weight and kept on putting on weight. Some boys in school attacked and bullied me so we had to complain to the principal. The mental stress of being bullied increased my obesity which, I think, was due to eating processed food and the lack of outdoor activities I enjoyed with my father while fishing, hunting, and canoeing on the lakes.”

Aiken felt empathy for Stan and asked him his name in Cree. Stan said it was “Peechee” meaning “mountain lion”. Aiken advised him to fight his obesity like a mountain lion. He asked Peechee whether he would agree to write a report for the Counsel on his diabetes to advance the treaty. Peechee agreed. John Dewey, then, said:

“Names and their connotations are very important in the Cree culture, denoting respect to Nature, man, and the animals. I respect your mission to reconcile traditional ecological knowledge of our indigenous culture with the dominant scientific Canadian culture. I am an accountant in the local fish factory and was distressed to know that the flesh of 81 fish from

several locations in the Saskatchewan River system contained an average of more than 1.0 ppm of mercury. Some fish collected had even much higher concentrations, with individual fish containing up to 11.2 ppm. I care for the fish as much as I care for Stan. We must, therefore, find a solution for the equitable usage of the water in the Saskatchewan River Delta. My people lived for the last 10,000 years in harmony with the rhythm of the river that flows.”

Aiden who had negotiated the resolution of the distribution of water in many regions realized that his mission would mainly be a cultural one in Saskatchewan. He would have to reconcile the viewpoints of the two cultures with opposing viewpoints on the long-term fluvial water usage shared by the two communities. Since the responsibility of new legislation about water management would depend on the federal and the inter-regional governments, a treaty would have to be signed to establish the laws which would have to deal with the impacts of global warming as well, he thought.

Saskatchewan river took its source from the Rocky Mountains of Southern Alberta and gathered its tributaries along the Great Plains until it became the North and South Saskatchewan rivers so that the fluvial delta of 10,000km² is the largest freshwater delta in North America. The upper western delta, fed by many channels, formed the wetland avulsion area with the Cumberland Marshes filled with many lakes. Cumberland Lake was the largest of them all.

The next day, John Dewey invited Aiken to a meeting with the local representatives dealing with water problems in the Council Hall. The hall was made of pine-wood planks decorated with tapestries and paintings of local fishing and hunting scenes. The delegation took their seats around a large horse-shoe shaped table convenient for direct communication. The elder, opened the debate with a demographic problem:

“The rapid population growth around the delta nearing three million necessitated the building of a huge 34-meter dam for electricity in 1966 which disrupted the traditional Cree livelihood. The Campbell dam with a 289 MW hydropower capacity and all the other dams built upstream decreased the amount of sediment of the delta and disrupted the river’s natural flow and changed the composition of the soil and air.”

Aiken asked him how this breach impacted the flora and fauna of the delta.

A member of the local delegation answered:

“Since the lake sturgeon spawn upstream, when the water channels decreased, fish numbers also decreased. The diminution of water in the wetlands decreased the insects and benthic weeds and invertebrates on which the ducks fed. With the diminution of the lacustrine vegetation the muskrat population dependent on the aquatic plants, and grasses for their survival also decreased since 1966. Pollution increased. Consequently, the river-rhythm of the Cree population’s livelihood based on duck, geese, moose, and muskrat for fur-hunting and on fishing the lake sturgeon was violated.”

Another member of the delegation referred to the side-effects technological change had on the residents’ health:

“With the change to processed food and the stress inflicted on jobless individuals the rate of diabetes in the population increased. Since we were cut off from our natural environment, at least one person in every two families, at present, is treated for diabetes and obesity.”

Aiken was taking notes all along to emphasize how a life-style change could impact one’s life negatively through chronic illness. John Dewey, then, invited Aiken to attend the monthly Cree story-telling session at the Council House to hear about the traditional Cree Knowledge of Nature Preservation based on the Cree Creation Story.

The meeting room of the Council House was lit as if it were a holiday. Accompanied by the Dewey family, Aiken was seated at their table and introduced to “Keasik”, Stan’s grandmother, who would speak about the Cree creation story. “Keasik” meant “sky blue” in Cree. Keasik came up to the lectern and said:

“Wahkohtowin” is the most important concept of our Creation Myth which considers all creation as relatives within one big family. For the Cree, men and animals have the same rights over water usage. Since water and all natural resources are Mother Nature’s gifts to us all, man has the right to use water and harvest Nature’s given gifts, the fruits and food. Cree water governance laws are based on spiritual principles like respect, cleanliness, and equitable stewardship managed traditionally.

We feel isolated in our endeavours. Our principles can neither be altered nor narrowed down by the Federal Government laws which must take them into consideration. “Wahkohtowin” considers all creation to be animate and pervaded by the Spirit. Therefore, as Aiken McCormick, our ombudsman has confirmed to us, reconciliation with our indigenous principles is indispensable to solve the water problem in Saskatchewan.”

An elderly woman who introduced herself as “Nuna” meaning “Land” in Cree continued with the Creation Story, saying:

“Water is a spirit and it is the life-blood of Mother Earth. Water is a valuable and sacred gift connecting all life. This is the reason why it must be respected and kept clean.”

A Métis elder who was also a water researcher in the government said:

“Trapping, fishing, and hunting are our modes of life and our identity. As such, we know how to regulate our resources. Most people who cannot fish and hunt feel ill. Yet, our territory is still under the “Boil Water” regulation since 2007 and we must buy our water from other regions. Most of our houses are still equipped with old copper pipes which are inappropriate for keeping the water clean.

The federal government would like to drill the groundwater but our regional government objects. Our Elders who are our knowledge keepers advise us to look for long-term intergenerational solutions to sustain our diverse ecosystems in the Saskatchewan River Delta which has always been our staple food store for our traditional food of smoked muskrat and moose meat.”

A question concerning the ancestral way of life came from a government water officer.

John Dewey answered: “When we went fishing and hunting, we felt a spiritual connection with the land and the animals we hunted; we enjoyed hearing their calls and respected the habitats the muskrats and beavers built. Now these animals are silent. They are stressed out, searching for scarce food in the partially dried-out mud lands.

Canoeing, fishing, sailing, fishing contests, and bartering meat and milk brought people together, contributing to our mental health. By contrast, now the wetlands and the diverse eco-

habitats have shrunk. Moreover, since the reduction of our ancestral activities, we have stopped using the Cree language often and new words based on our activities fail to be added into the Cree vocabulary. Our language cannot evolve.”

Then, a member of the federal scientific council took the floor and said:

“Since the dams disrupt the sediment regime and the river-flow, water levels vary downstream; and when levels are heavy, many eco-habitats are destroyed. Oxygen levels are depleted while ammonia increases in the mud-lands, creating an unbreathable stench. According to our estimates 20% less water is flowing through the delta. Since 1960, the Delta has warmed 2C by year and 6C in the winter which heightens the drought.

Furthermore, I have been informed that the governments were planning to divert more water into Qu’Appelle Valley upstream from the reservoir which will decrease the flow to the Saskatchewan Delta even more. Prospection of oil, diamonds, gold, and zinc will further deteriorate the ecosystem and its inhabitants. Therefore, a treaty must be signed with the local and the federal representatives to regulate water management of the delta.”

Based on this significant meeting with the Elders of the Cree community, Aiken McCormick prepared a treaty to be signed by all parties concerning the delta’s water management and the amelioration of the Clean Water Bill C-61.

- 1) The Federal Government and the regional governments will recognize the traditional knowledge of the Cree population handed down by their Elders.
- 2) The Federal Government will accept a Reconciliation Plan that will take include the traditional regulations of the Cree when passing on legislation to make progress on The First Nations Clean Water Bill (Bill C-61) which will give greater autonomy to the indigenous community on ecological water governance.

3) The Federal and Regional Governments will assimilate the concept of “Cultural Flows of Water” which endow the Indigenous Nation with a sufficient quantity of high-quality water to improve the life quality of their respective communities. For this purpose, the Crown corporation, the Campbell Dam Organisation, and the Water Security Agencies will work with the Delta resident councils to implement ecologically sustainable river flows.

4) Data from water gauges from different regions should be shared and compared regularly to measure and regulate the river’s flow. The water flows must be coordinated with the Gardiner Dam to warrant that the delta receives the adequate supply of clean water. The upstream and downstream communities must be coordinated.

5) The licensing of future dams should be negotiated with First Nation representatives of the local governments based on the amount of water necessary for the equitable needs of their communities.

6) For this purpose, an “power with” perspective instead of a “power over” one should be adopted by the legislative agency that will reconcile the native holistic approach with the scientific one of the federal government.

After the treaty was signed by the representatives of the Cumberland House Cree Nation, the Métis Local Trappers Association, the Fishermen’s Cooperative and the Federal Government, it was sent to the Federal Government for ratification which would allow the terms of the treaty to be read, approved, and applied.

The Cree organized a celebration in the large Cree wigwam, a teepee made of moose hides and wooden piles. Purple, orange, black, white, and blue colours mingled in the women’s local costumes adorned with fur strips and on the fur boots hand-made and painted on moose leather. Aiken offered Stan a monthly voucher for a residence in a rehabilitation centre for chronic diseases in Manitoba to help regain his health. Stan thanked Aiken in gratitude. He would, thus, continue to fight his illness like a “peechee”. he would regain his health like the Saskatchewan River would regain its dynamic flow signified by its name.