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Indigenizing Energy in Manitoba

The main goals of this presentation are: a) to outline the cultural effects of large energy development projects upon Indigenous communities, and the resulting effects upon community and individual well-being; and b) to *indigenize* our conceptions of energy in order to create more just, respectful and sustainable energy practices in Manitoba.

Much of the conflict that has often surrounded energy projects near indigenous communities has happened because of fundamental misunderstandings about the role and meaning of energy in Indigenous philosophies and practices. Through my research with Elders and knowledge-keepers in my own Métis community and in other Cree and Anishinaabe communities in Canada, I have learned a number of teachings that can help to give members of the broader public a better understanding of the ways in which large energy projects may threaten indigenous cultural vitality and social well-being. By sharing these findings with the Clean Environment Commission, I hope to provide important cultural context for the Commission's deliberations.

The energy unconscious and its effects on Indigenous people

Contemporary Western society is characterized by a particular relationship to energy that I have called "the energy unconscious," in which the users of energy (ie, consumers, investors) generally have very little idea about where their energy comes from or what environmental and social costs are associated with that energy. The convenience and apparent cleanliness of electricity makes it one of the most easily "disassociated" forms of energy in the contemporary world. However, as has been well established by many scholars and observers, hydroelectricity does indeed have an environmental, social and cultural footprint, one that is often much more visible in Indigenous communities than in the cities where most electricity is consumed.

Low population densities, ongoing histories of colonial disempowerment, and the existence of alternate (non-capitalist) value systems within Indigenous communities make them particularly vulnerable to the effects of large energy developments. While such projects generally create some economic activity and jobs in the affected regions, they can also create what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence": contamination of land, water and air; health and safety crises; disruptions of the social fabric and family structures; and perhaps most devastating, erosion of the people's connection to their land. Thus it is not surprising that indigenous people are often in the vanguard of resistance movements that aim to stop or disrupt these projects. However, this resistance is motivated by something far more profound than NIMBYism or a simple reaction to the perceived negative consequences of development. It is instead deeply rooted in the

philosophical and spiritual contexts of specific Indigenous nations and their particular territories.

Indigenous energy intimacy

Traditional Indigenous energy-use practices are characterized by "energy intimacy," in which each community member necessarily has direct and personal relationships with the sources of their energy. In hunter-gatherer societies, it is a matter of survival to be able to locate, process and utilize energy sources for oneself, whether these sources are derived from wood, animal fat, food, or other fuels. This fact also has philosophical and spiritual implications. Energy in such a context becomes based primarily upon the relationship between the people and their land, and in Indigenous cultures this relationship is not one of mastery or objectification, but rather of kinship, respect and responsibility. The land is conceived not as a reservoir of resources to be exploited, but as a source of gifts which humans must accept with gratitude. The reciprocity of the gift-relationship results in a fundamentally different conception of energy compared to today's prevailing western ideologies of energy extraction, commodification and ownership.

Energy, *pastahowin*, and Indigenous environmental ethics

In most Indigenous cultures there is little interest in generalized concepts of energy as they are understood in western cultures, but instead there are teachings about the vitality of all beings, including the earth itself. Therefore, energy in Indigenous contexts is almost always about relationships, and inevitably about ethics. Two of the most important teachings in many Indigenous traditions are that no one should make demands upon nature, and no one should ever waste resources by using more than immediate needs dictate. Omushkego Cree Elder Louis Bird explains his people's ethical obligation toward the environment when he says,

there were rules about respecting nature and the environment—the animals and the birds. If one of these were broken by a member of the family... the punishment was a retraction of the benefits from nature (75-6).

Bird also discusses the concept of *pastahowin*, the "sin against nature" (77) which involves any action that shows disrespect to the natural world, such as wasting resources or failing to give thanks for the gifts received from the land. As in the story of the caribou, the punishment for an act of *pastahowin* is that nature withholds further gifts from the transgressor and his or her community. Re-establishing an ethical relationship with the natural world then becomes a matter of immediate survival.

Energy intimacy and Indigenous concepts of energy sustainability

If we are to indigenize energy practices on a large scale, it will involve becoming more connected on an intimate level with the sources of our energy—understanding where it comes from and how that source-location is affected when the energy is extracted, processed and delivered to the user. We will need to become like locavores, sensitive to the environmental costs and contexts of our energy. This will also require a fundamental change in the way nature is conceived in Western culture, and a move toward understanding energy as gift rather than as commodity.