The Responsibilities of Women: Confronting Environmental Contamination in the Traditional Territories of Asubpeechoseewagong Netum Anishinabek (Grassy Narrows) and Wabauskang First Nation

Leanne Simpson (Mississauga), Ph.D., Principle Investigator, Contaminants Project

Judy DaSilva (Anishinabekwe), Asubpeechoseewagong Netum Anishinabek Contaminants Project Coordinator, Grassy Narrows First Nation

Betty Riffel (Anishinabekwe), Contaminants Project Coordinator Wabauskang First Nation

Patricia Sellers, Assistant Professor, Department of Biology, University of Carolina at Pembroke

ABSTRACT

From the early 1960s to the late 1970s, Reed Paper dumped more than 50 000 pounds of mercury into the English-Wabigoon River system. At the time, Anishinabek people, whose territory encompasses the river system, were dependent upon the river for food and water. Fish from the river system were a staple in the diet of community members, and fishing was an important cultural and economic activity. People got their drinking water from the river and hunted and trapped animals that were also dependent on the same resources. Many community members suffered from severe mercury poisoning, and all communities dependent upon the English-Wabigoon river system continue to deal with the social, cultural and health impacts of living in a contaminated ecosystem. In 2003, a group of women from the communities of Asubpeechoseewagong Netum Anishinabek (Grassy Narrows) and Wabauskang First Nation, located in North-Western Ontario began to study the impacts of environmental contaminants on their traditional territories using both Anishinabek knowledge and western science. They were concerned about the impact of environmental contaminants on the health and well-being of women and their children. From 2001 to 2005, the two communities completed a large traditional foods testing program and held two Anishinabek Knowledge workshops to discuss the impact of contamination on their communities. The purpose of this paper is to share the women’s, Elders’ and Anishinabek Knowledge Holders perspectives on how contamination continues to impact their communities.

KEYWORDS

Environmental contamination, traditional foods, Indigenous Knowledge
Traditional Foodways, the Backbone of Community Health

Traditional food systems or foodways have been the foundation of community health for Indigenous Peoples in the Americas since time immemorial. In negotiating treaties with settler governments, Anishinabek people intended to protect these systems in order to ensure the health and well-being of future generations and the continuity of their way of life. The forces of colonialism, including deforestation, hydro-electric development and environmental contamination, have undermined and destroyed aspects of traditional food systems. Attacks on traditional food systems are direct attacks on Anishinabek culture, as it is through these traditional food systems that Indigenous Peoples foster their relations with the natural world, their relationships with other Indigenous nations, their economies, their spiritual practices, and the social systems that maintain the emotional well-being of families and communities.

The economy was fostered through respectful and reciprocal relations with the Gifts of Creation, practiced not for the purpose of getting rich, but to continue promoting a good life for the generations to come. The backbone of the Anishinabek economic lifeway was the careful harvesting of traditional foods, and the ceremonial practices of redistributing the wealth of the harvest amongst community members, particularly to the Elders and to families without hunters. Complex international trading relationships with other Indigenous nations were nurtured in part through the trade of traditional foods, which, in turn, maintained political relationships between these nations.

Traditional foodways provided the foundation for traditional Anishinabek governance. Clans tied groups of people from the same clan to an animal nation. Seasonal ceremonies, that frequently included feasts, maintained an essential connection and symbiotic relationship between the people and the natural world. Food was considered good medicine, a gift from Creation, given to sustain mino bimaadiziwin, the “good life” or “the continuous rebirth of life.” Feasting, both as a way of redistributing wealth and of offering thanksgiving, was (and remains) an important part of the ritualized spiritual life of Anishinabek people.

In contemporary times, many Indigenous Peoples see the restoration of their freedom and the recognition of their identity as Indigenous nations as the only way forward. They claim a future in which all people are able to decolonize themselves and revitalize traditional relationships is one in which they are able to once again fulfill their responsibilities to Creation. Revitalizing Indigenous food systems is part of that larger goal, that requires Elders and Knowledge Holders to actively pass their knowledge down to their youth. It requires the protection of Indigenous territories from contamination and environmental destruction. It requires that Indigenous People disconnect themselves from western diets and begin to once again live active and healthy lives, sustained by their traditional foods (Waziyatawin, 2005).

Anishinabe-kwewag and Traditional Foodways

To maintain sustainable traditional food sources, all members of Anishinabek communities had - and continue to have - responsibilities. As mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters, and daughters, Anishinabe-kwewag (Ojibway women) have important responsibilities to do with the land and with matters concerning the nation. Their relationship to water is part of those responsibilities.

Water is a purifier, cleansing our bodies and protecting us from disease. Water is the lifeblood that protects unborn children and nurtures them until they are ready to pass through the doorway into this world. Similarly, water is the lifeblood of ecosystems, purifying the land through rains and natural flooding, and it is the responsibility of women to protect that water, to ensure that it is clean and safe to drink.

Mothering children gives Anishinabe-kwewag the responsibility of carefully monitoring the food they feed their families to keep them healthy. Women engaged in food preparation are in a unique position to evaluate the quality of their traditional foods, and, based on their experience with uncontaminated and healthy foods from the past, aunts and grandmothers assist in assessing this quality. Women also often care for the elderly, which allows them to be close to their Elders, and they are also involved in the health care of those who are sick. Womens’ responsibilities make them clearly aware of the impact of environmental contamination on their food systems and therefore on the health and well-being of their family members.

The women of Asubpeechosewagon Netum Anishinabek (Grassy Narrows) and Wabauskang First Nation take their responsibilities very seriously. For years, the women have noticed a decrease in the health and well-being of their families, particularly of their children. In addition to the ‘usual’ increase in diabetes and cancers amongst the older members of their families, they have witnessed an increase in neurological disorders,
miscarriages, birth defects, and life threatening childhood diseases. Women, Elders and traditional Knowledge Holders believe that these illnesses are a result of the environmental contamination that is wreaking havoc on their traditional food sources.

**Mercury Contamination at Asubpeechoseewagong Netum Anishinabek and Wabauskang First Nation**

The communities of Asubpeechoseewagong Netum Anishinabek and Wabauskang have been coping with the destructive impacts of unsanctioned industrialized development on their territory for several decades. It began in Grassy Narrows in the 1950s when Ontario Hydro flooded a large tract of their territory for hydroelectric development. Rice beds were destroyed and community members were left to deal with the danger and destruction of fluctuating water levels, while Ontario Hydro shipped “cheap and clean” hydro electricity to the south.

In the 1960s, Indian Affairs relocated the community, causing another devastating upheaval for many people who had already been diminished by the impact of residential schools and, through the use of colonial legislation designed to undermine their culture, their rights, and sovereignty, the refusal of state governments to recognize the Anishinabek treaty rights.

But it was an event spanning from the early 1960s to the late 1970s that devastated these strong and resilient communities. During this period Reed Paper severely contaminated the English-Wabigoon River system in dumping more than 50,000 pounds of mercury into it. (LaDuke, 1999). Anishinabek people, who relied on the water from the river for drinking and fishing, were not told about the mercury until several years later. For over a decade they continued to drink the contaminated water and to eat the contaminated fish.

Fish from the river system were a staple in the diet of community members. As well, commercial fishing and guiding sport fishers provided the community with its main source of jobs, and when the federal and provincial governments of Canada finally acknowledged the contamination and made commercial fishing illegal, the employment rate plummeted from 90 per cent to 10 per cent (Brophy, 2005). Fishing represented a substantial component of the local economy, and when the fish were no longer edible, people lost their sustenance, their economic and food security, and their way of life became threatened.

Asubpeechoseewagong Netum Anishinabek eventually received compensation for the contamination in the 1980s, but their Elders and Anishinabek Knowledge Holders have continued to report that the mercury contamination is still in the river system and that it still has significant negative impacts on the fish, aquatic animals, water and wildlife, and still contributes to illness in the community. This perspective contrasts sharply with what the Anishinabek people were told at the time. Scientists and government officials assured community members that the system would be completely clean of mercury in 30 years.

The community of Wabauskang was never compensated for the mercury contamination, nor have they been tested for mercury poisoning, and community members continue to suffer from health impacts that they attribute to the contamination. Community members (who spoke little English and lived in relative isolation) did not know that they had been exposed to large amounts of mercury until the late 1980s. The people living at Quibell, which is located directly downstream from the mill, were drinking river water and eating fish throughout the 1970s, unaware of the contamination. Again, the impacts of contamination were severe and devastating for the families involved. Several babies who were being bottled fed with milk made from the river water died, and several others, including babies that were being breastfed, were permanently damaged by the contamination.

Betty Riffel, who was a child at the time, living with her family along the river at Quibell, remembers this horrific and traumatic experience very well. Her younger brother Donny was one of the babies that died. Sick from birth, he lived only nine months and had repeated and violent seizures until he died, as did all the other babies at the time. Medical officials told her parents that he had “an incurable disease.” Betty believes the death of these babies, along with the deaths and disabilities of community members, are consistent with severe mercury poisoning. Neither industry nor the federal or provincial government has attempted to make amends for this blatant injustice. After her baby brother died, Betty went for a long walk in the bush, during which she made a promise to herself and to him to do something about this horrible injustice. Her work on this project is part of that promise.

**Confronting Contamination**

In 2001, two women from Grassy Narrows, Judy DaSilva and Roberta Keesic, with the support of the Elders and the youth, launched a three-pronged approach to address the continued attack on their land and their community. Contamination from the mercury spills, in the way the Elders had talked about it, had removed people from the
land. There was no point in fishing if you could not eat the fish. Deforestation on many trap lines had reduced the number of commercial trappers the territory could support. In response, the women held (and continue to hold) a women's gathering in which they developed an action plan for the future to protect our first mother, the Earth.

One of the outcomes of these gatherings is the Andawenjigwe Survival Project, a cultural immersion project using traditional methods, designed to teach youth basic survival and traditional skills. A second outcome of the gathering was the erection of a physical blockade on a logging road to stop the logging in the forest, and to raise public awareness of the impacts of corporate deforestation of Indigenous territories.

Many of the women in Grassy Narrows and Wabauskang know that when the environment is sick, the people will also become sick. They believe that the environment has been severely ill since the mercury contamination in the 1960s, and they believe that this combined with the rapid deforestation of their traditional lands (and the applications of pesticides in industrial reforestation programs) is the root cause of many of the diseases and illnesses experienced by their family members. They also know that because they have no “scientific proof” to back up the cause and effect relationship that seems so obvious to them, their concerns have been largely ignored by state governments.

For their third initiative, Judy and Roberta joined forces with Betty Riffel of Wabauskang First Nation, assembling a team to investigate the impacts of environmental contamination on their communities. From 2001 to 2005, a research team consisting of Judy DaSilva, Betty Riffel, Anishinabek academic Leanne Simpson, and non-Native scientist Patricia Sellers, using western science and Indigenous knowledge, completed three studies investigating the impact of environmental contamination on the two communities.

The research team was committed to doing things differently in our project. The two communities who lived through the contamination were the decision makers, while the scientists and academics involved in the project acted as advisors. Our largest and most comprehensive study, which came in 2004-2005, had three components:

1. The Anishinabek Knowledge component documented the impacts of contamination from the perspective of the Elders and community Knowledge Holders.
2. The traditional foods component monitored fish, wildlife and plants for heavy metals, dioxins, furans, and organochlorine contaminants.
3. The sediment and crayfish component tested sediments and crayfish for mercury in several lakes, most of which had not been tested before despite the known history of pollution.
4. The rest of this paper will focus primarily on the Anishinabek Knowledge component and the contaminants study.

**An Anishinabek Research Process**

Research in Indigenous communities must abide by the intellectual traditions and research protocols of the people themselves and must approach the subject matter in a manner that colonizes neither the participants nor their knowledge. The methodology for this project was developed and carried out with the Indigenous Knowledge holders of Asubpechseewagong Netum Anishinabek and Wabauskang First Nation.

The research originated in the community and the community remained in control of the project from start to finish. Our project was rooted in Anishinabek Knowledge, and Elders were consulted in the customary way throughout the project, particularly when important decisions were being made regarding the research.

Beyond this commitment to Anishinabek Knowledge and process, the project also required a commitment to an indigenous and decolonizing approach. Indigenous or decolonizing methodologies contain a wide variety of evolving methods and strategies predicated on privileging indigenous voices, approaches, ontology, epistemology, and methodology (Rigney 1999, Smith 1999, Ladner 2000, Simpson 2004). This approach is necessary in Indigenous Knowledge research because this knowledge is part of a large, comprehensive (and poorly understood from a western perspective) system of knowledge, every bit as complex as western science. Elders in this type of knowledge system are considered to be experts, and their expertise is respected. The protocols embodied in this approach extend to western scientists who interface with the research process, the Knowledge Holders and the Elders on community-driven projects such as this.

Along with the Elders, Judy and Betty wanted to ensure that Anishinabek Knowledge regarding the contamination was being passed down to the youth. They also wanted to generate scientific data about contamination levels in their traditional foods. Because governments do not value Indigenous Knowledge, they thought it was important to gain scientific evidence in order to advance their political goals. Because community members do not trust studies done by those from outside the community, they also thought that it was important that they did the scientific studies themselves.
Indigenous Knowledge and Elders Shape Western Science

The western scientific component of the project was necessarily shaped by the expressed concerns of the community and the Indigenous Knowledge embodied within it. The design of the sampling strategy for the traditional foods and sediment components began with visits to the communities and ended when enough had been learned from the Indigenous Knowledge Holders to design a strategy consistent with the directive from the Elders. In our study, the scientist listened to what people said about pollution, the land, and where they fish and do not fish. They asked questions and learned many things about the water (levels, currents, colour, seasonal changes) and about the animals, birds and fish that use the waters. Because Indigenous Knowledge Holders directly influenced the sampling strategy, it looked different from what it might have looked like had it been guided by western science alone. It was challenging for the scientist to take this approach in the design without compromising the integrity of the research.

Presenting results is a standard part of the scientific process and this component, too, required a design that deviated from standard methods. The community was the first to have access to the results and to see and hear the results in PowerPoint presentations made by the scientist. In these presentations, care was taken to minimize the use of complex scientific graphs and text and to maximize the use of photographs, maps, simple graphics, and plain language discussion. Presentation of the scientific results to the wider scientific community was made only after approval of it by the Elders. This approach to western science is different from standard practices, as it must be, if it is going to work for Indigenous People rather than against them.

Protecting Indigenous Knowledge

As well as utilizing Anishinabek Knowledge throughout all aspects of the project, we also hosted a two-day workshop for Elders and youth to discuss the impact of contamination on the community. The Indigenous Knowledge research team, led by Judy, Betty and Leanne was inclusive of Anishinabek and Indigenous traditions, Anishinabek environmental philosophy and Anishinabek knowledge, and research protocols. Our community recorders had considerable experience with Anishinabek Knowledge and the traditions and protocols of their communities, and were also fluent speakers of Anishinabek language. The workshop proceeded in Anishinaabemowin (Ojibway language).

School children attended the workshop as observers, and it was broadcast over Grassy Narrows’ community radio station.

The research proceeded as follows: Researchers introduced themselves and the project to the Elders and Knowledge Holders. The project’s goals and objectives were explained in the Anishinabek language as was other pertinent information related to informed consent. In this research an ethical procedure for informed consent relied on respect for the traditions and customs of the research participants. Informed consent was obtained in accordance with Anishinabek research protocols. We did not use a written information/consent form because such forms are often viewed with suspicion and distrust, to the extent that many traditional people will not participate in the research because they view reliance on written documentation as indicative that the researcher and the project are unreliable and untrustworthy.

Informed consent was obtained orally according to community cultural traditions. The Elders and traditional land users were then invited to speak in whatever manner they chose as most appropriate. This process continued until the research participants informed the research team that they were finished. The research team thanked the participants and the meeting was closed using cultural protocols.

In order to fulfill the requirements of one of our funders, we were required to prepare a written report documenting the information that the Elders shared in the workshop. This was outlined in our funding agreement, which also stated that our funder would be able to distribute the report, transcribed interviews, recordings, and any other primary data as they saw fit. The Elders and members of the research team were concerned about this requirement, since Indigenous Knowledge is so often misused, taken out of context and made accessible without the permission of the Knowledge Holders. (Any report submitted to our government funders could be accessed by anyone through the Freedom of Information Act).

For the Elders, it was important that the knowledge was shared in an inherently culturally-appropriate way, and, coming from an oral culture, this meant that the youth were present to hear the knowledge in its original form. The Elders had little use for the written report and they believed, as did the members of the research team, that this knowledge belonged to the Knowledge Holders and to the community. As Knowledge Keepers, the Elders took their responsibilities for the protection of Indigenous Knowledge very seriously. Some of the Elders had shared knowledge
with outsiders before, and that knowledge had been used in inappropriate ways, which made them especially concerned with how funders might use the knowledge. They believed that, as the keepers of their community’s knowledge, they were the owners of the knowledge and they had the right to decide how their knowledge would be shared and if it would be distributed.

The research team believed that the Elders and the community owned their knowledge. Although, after lengthy negotiations with the funders we were unable to get them to agree with our position, we were successful in changing the contribution agreement to be slightly more respectful of our rights. By modifying our methodology, we were able to meet both the needs of our funders and the needs of the Elders.

The workshop proceeded in an oral fashion, in Anishinaabemowin. The community recorders we hired were language speakers who recorded only information related specifically to the written objectives of the project. That information, which was in aggregate form (without the names of the Elders), was used to write the final report for our funders. Names of individuals participating in the Indigenous Knowledge Workshop were not recorded, comments recorded were not attributed to individual participants, and the “data” will be presented in aggregate form for reporting purposes. The information gathered at the workshop formed the basis for the funders’ report.

**The Elders Speak**

Few studies in the academic literature document the impact of environmental contamination on Indigenous communities from the perspectives of Indigenous Knowledge Holders (MacDonald et al., 1997, Simpson, 2001). However, reading more broadly, it is possible to find Indigenous perspectives on traditional foodways, health and wellness, environmental contamination, and decolonization. During the two-day workshop, Elders from Grassy Narrows and Wabauskang spoke about contamination in the same broad and holistic manner as the Anishinabek and Haudenosaunee Elders interviewed in the socio-cultural component of the EAGLE Project (Simpson, 2001).


According to the Elders, life was good before the flooding, relocation, contamination, and deforestation. The plants and animals were healthy and in abundance, and the water was pure and cleansed the body of toxins. The people were healthy and well. Families spent large blocks of time out on the land, harvesting their traditional foods and medicines, drinking the water, and nurturing family relationships. The community was stable and many people worked in the commercial fishing economy as fishers and as guides. Diets were high in protein and low in fat. People were physically active, and had strong emotional bonds to extended families and community. There were far fewer diseases afflicting community members, which the Elders attribute to their healthy lifestyle. Although life was hard work, it had meaning for the people and Elders told many stories of good times.

With the contamination of the English-Wabigoon river system many things changed drastically over a short period of time. At first, no one knew what was happening around them – people suddenly got ill, for no apparent reason. When the commercial fishery was closed, families lost their livelihoods along with the fish that was a staple in their diet. People were no longer out on the waterways fishing with family members and friends. As people could no longer fish, aspects of their culture, language and way of life were affected.

In particular regions in the territory, aspects of the language associated with fishing and with being out on the water were used less. Store bought foods, which were expensive, highly processed and low in nutritional value replaced nutrient-rich traditional foods. The dramatic loss of the traditional economy and the ability for families to be self-sufficient sent the community into poverty and economic despair, which strained family relationships. Water was no longer safe to drink in the territory. Younger community members were lost, seeing little value in their own culture and few opportunities for the future.

The Elders believe that mercury contamination continues to cause severe health issues for the Anishinabek people living in the English-Wabigoon River system, and that these health issues are felt through the generations. They believe that the fish, animals, birds, and plants are sick, and that when the land is sick, the people are also sick. They believe that the relationships between these sicknesses must be fully addressed before the community can move forward and begin to rebuild.
Elders reported seeing a dramatic increase in cancers, diabetes, neurological disorders, miscarriages, and birth defects, both in the generation that lived through the mercury contamination and in the subsequent generations following it. From a social perspective, the Elders reported an increase in violence in the community, along with drug and alcohol abuse, and family breakdown.

The Elders also pointed out that mercury is not the only source of contamination within their territory. They are also concerned about the use of pesticides in the territory, done without permission from the forest industry, as well as other pollutants released by the pulp and paper industry, and contaminants transported to their community through the air.

The Elders believe that the impact assessment of contamination on health and well-being must be approached from a context that recognizes all the other “contaminants” with which the community must deal. Assessing the contaminant levels of a few chemicals is only one aspect of a much larger and more complex picture. The Elders take a long-term and holistic approach to assessing contamination, encouraging us to think about the impacts on the plants and animals and on the next seven generations of people. They believe that their waterways are contaminated with a “chemical soup” resultant from unmitigated industrial development and that as a result the whole ecosystem is sick. Viewing the ecosystem as an interconnected and interdependent system of which we are a part and taking a long-term holistic approach urges us to be both cautious and precautionous about decisions we make today in regards to the environment. For the Elders, there are no “safe” levels of contamination.

The Elders strongly suggest that returning to a diet that includes traditional foods cooked in a traditional way would increase the health and well-being of our communities. The Elders regard traditional food as an integral part of a culturally grounded way of life given to them by the Creator. Traditional foods are part of their culture. Being out on the land, harvesting food properly and taking care of the food system as a whole requires people to live their culture. Traditional foods are seen as “good medicine,” high in nutrients and vitamins and inexpensive. Revitalizing traditional Anishinabek foodways is an important part of decolonizing. The Elders believe this, even while they are concerned about the impact of mercury and other contaminants on their traditional foods.

It is strongly felt amongst the Elders that there has been no justice with regard to the mercury contamination issue. They believe that governments have not lived up to either their responsibilities or the promises they made to the community after the contamination was discovered and during the negotiation of the compensation agreement. The Elders believe that the people and the natural environment are still suffering from the impacts of this contamination and that unless the situation is cleaned up, we will pass on these problems to future generations.

The Elders also see colonialism and the occupation of our land as “contamination” that continues to impact both our lands and our people, including the denial of treaty relationships/rights with the Crown, the destruction of our traditional territories by deforestation, the impact of residential schools, and the institution of state policies designed to undermine our sovereignty, assimilate our children and carry out cultural genocide, all pollute our relationships with our sacred ecology.

Environmental contamination is just one facet of the colonial grip the government continues to have on our people. It is a symptom of a much larger problem in our relationship with the occupying nation, and of how it deals with the natural world. It is a symptom of disrespect, domination, control, aggression, and injustice.

Western Science and Anishinabek Knowledge

In this study, western science was used within a larger Anishinabek framework, and we tried to respect both systems distinct traditions, ways of questioning, ways of generating new knowledge and understanding. We also recognized that western society recognizes western scientific knowledge over Indigenous Knowledge, creating a tremendous power imbalance that is reinforced by other colonial realities. We did not want to use western science to back up what the Elders were saying because we believe that their knowledge is valid in its own right. Instead, we used it to emphasize what is known by the Elders, using an approach and a language that would be understood by government officials and other scientists.

There is a broad feeling in Grassy Narrows and Wabauskang that justice has not been achieved in relation to the mercury contamination. Thirty years after the spill and 20 years after compensation, the community is still dealing with devastating environmental and health impacts, and the expression of these concerns are falling on deaf ears. Treaty #3 Tribal Council has demanded a public inquiry into the mercury contamination and how it was dealt with at the time. The Elders of Grassy Narrows and Wabauskang want the mercury “cleaned-up,” the deforestation to stop and the polluting of their lands and rivers by industry to stop.
Some people in Grassy have talked about raising funds for a permanent environment centre and program to monitor all of the environmental issues facing the community. Others continue to develop alliances with environmental and social justice groups in order to put pressure on the federal government to "do something."

In January 2007, the Chief and Council, the Grassy Narrows Environmental Group, trappers, clan mothers, Elders and youth came together and declared a moratorium on industrial development on their traditional lands (www.freegrassy.org), because their "fundamental ability to traditionally harvest in order to feed and support our families, as we have for millennia, is being jeopardized" as a result of intensive clearcut logging of their traditional territory by Abitibi Consolidated and Weyerhauser. Through all of this, the women of Grassy Narrows and Wabauskang continue to live up to their responsibilities to the water, the land, their families and their communities, but their path has not been an easy one. They continue to struggle to protect their land and their foodways, and to protect their families from disease and illness as best they can under the very difficult circumstances described in this paper.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would first like to thank and acknowledge all of the Elders, Grandmothers, Grandfathers, and Anishinabek Knowledge Holders from Grassy Narrows and Wabauskang who participated in this project. Funding for this research was provided by the Health Canada's Ontario Regional Contaminants Fund, the Commission for Environmental Cooperation's North American Fund for Environmental Cooperation, Health Canada's National First Nations Environmental Contaminants Fund, and in kind contributions from Grassy Narrows and Wabauskang First Nations.

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