

(Re)Visiting the North: Reflections from the Mushuau-nipi (George River)

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Article abstract

Cultural narratives of northern wilderness are central to any understanding of the ongoing development of Canada, particularly as they relate to Aboriginal people and environmental change. This paper provides a critical interdisciplinary perspective on the related concepts of region, wilderness and landscape as they are used to describe the North. The literature review exposes the personal, political and ideological uses of landscape to better understand how places, like the George River of Nitassinan, Innu territory, are inscribed with contested meanings. Political discourses about places draw upon economic, cultural and scientific constructions of land and its use, while wilderness mythology continues to dominate public policies relating to park creation and protected area management. The *Séminaires nordiques autochtones* (Northern Aboriginal Seminars) held on the George River are presented as one prospect for mediating complex land use conflicts through dialogues about culture, wilderness, environment and development.

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Abstract

Cultural narratives of northern wilderness are central to any understanding of the ongoing development of Canada, particularly as they relate to Aboriginal people and environmental change. This paper provides a critical interdisciplinary perspective on the related concepts of region, wilderness and landscape as they are used to describe the North. The literature review exposes the personal, political and ideological uses of landscape to better understand how places, like the George River of Nitassinan, Innu territory, are inscribed with contested meanings. Political discourses about places draw upon economic, cultural and scientific constructions of land and its use, while wilderness mythology continues to dominate public policies relating to park creation and protected area management. The Séminaires nordiques autochtones (Northern Aboriginal Seminars) held on the George River are presented as one prospect for mediating complex land use conflicts through dialogues about culture, wilderness, environment and development.

Résumé

Les récits culturels du milieu sauvage du Nord sont essentiels à la compréhension du développement permanent du Canada, en particulier dans la mesure où ils se rapportent aux Autochtones et au changement environnemental. Cette étude présente un point de vue interdisciplinaire critique sur les concepts connexes de région, de milieu sauvage et de paysage, qui sont utilisés pour décrire le Nord. L'analyse documentaire présente les utilisations personnelles, politiques et idéologiques du paysage pour permettre de mieux comprendre comment des endroits comme la rivière George de Nitassinan, le territoire innu, ont des significations contestées. Les discours politiques sur les lieux sont fondés sur des constructions économiques, culturelles et scientifiques du territoire et de son utilisation, tandis que la mythologie du milieu sauvage continue de dominer les politiques publiques relatives à la création de parcs et à la gestion des zones protégées. Les

Séminaires nordiques autochtones tenus sur la rivière George sont présentés comme une possibilité de soumettre à la médiation les conflits complexes sur l'utilisation du territoire au moyen de dialogues sur la culture, le milieu sauvage, l'environnement et le développement.

Introduction

This paper stems from an experience on the George River or Mushuau-nipi in the traditional Innu territory of Nitassinan, in Northern Québec and Labrador. It uses a personal narrative as the starting point to integrate and interrogate observations about various interdisciplinary perspectives on the related concepts of region, the North, frontier, wilderness and landscape as they might apply to the case of the Mushuau-nipi. Familiar themes and narratives about Canada are revisited in light of current social and political struggles of the Innu, to assess how such themes relate to broad cultural understandings about a people who are inseparable from a particular place. It ends by identifying the need for culturally-based ecological knowledge and identifies the Northern Aboriginal Seminars model as an opportunity for dialogue about restoring community health and protecting vast ecological systems upon which social well-being depends.

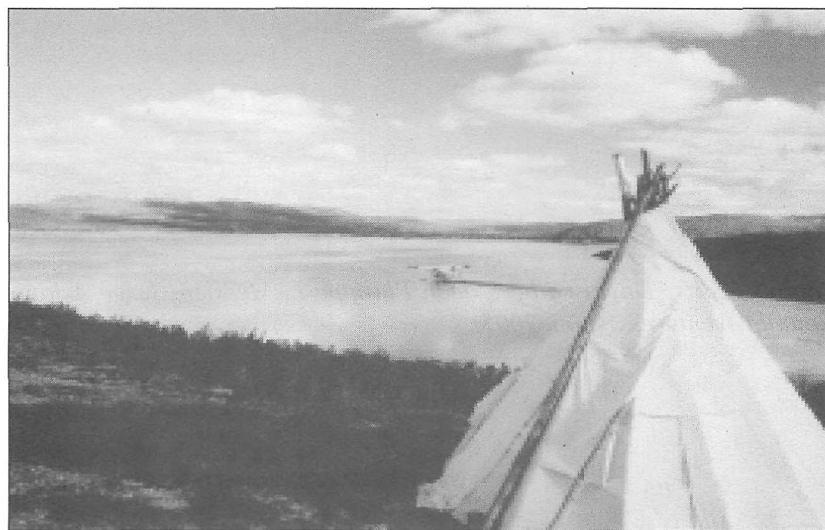
In August 2006, I had the privilege of attending the second annual Northern Aboriginal Seminar on the George River, 250 km north of Schefferville, Québec. The event was organized by an Innu ecotourism company, *Aventures Ashini*, with the support of several environmentalists dedicated to Aboriginal development and ecological protection of the George River. The goal of the seminars is to bring a diverse group of people together in a culturally significant place to discuss and debate approaches to Aboriginal and environmental issues. Participants from conservation, science, law, social work, government, media, archaeology, environmental activism and tourism, along with international journalists and people from Innu communities, came to listen to Innu elders and political leaders, and to share perspectives on environmental and Aboriginal crises in the context of development in Northern Québec. Proceedings were held in French and Innu, and as I was the only Anglophone participant, information came to me through single or double translation. I would further situate myself as an outsider, scholar and observer, visiting the North for the first time, and embraced by an unlikely and ephemeral group of people brought together upon invitation by our Innu hosts.

The purpose of the week of lectures is to stimulate debate on issues that share environmental and Aboriginal dimensions and explore how

“the environmental solution will stem from collaboration between nations” – in this case, between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people within Québec and Canada. Held at a traditional encampment at Wedge Point at Mushuau-nipi (also known as *Lac de la terre sans arbres*), participants sleep in tipis and hold debates under a communal Shaputuan [Photos 1, 2, 3]. They assist with fishing, hunting and berry-picking and have the opportunity to paddle Rabaska canoes, swim in the river, hike one of the largest eskers in Québec, and witness the caribou migration at its crossing. With the new threat of hydroelectric development, the George River has become a site for debate about land use, resource management and sustainable livelihoods. Despite somewhat familiar themes, the explicit intent of the seminars is to remove participants from their familiar worldviews and immerse them in a radically different framework – one of traditional Innu life and contemporary Innu struggle – with which to reflect on complex challenges. The theme of the seminar is also explicitly linked to the physical site of debate: a traditional meeting place for hunting, trade, marriage, and celebration. The site of Wedge Point, occupied since time immemorial, was inhabited by our group in the same spirit of exchange, but revisited in the context of rapid environmental and cultural transformation.



Photo Credits: David Gilbert, Jean Philippe L. Messier, Serge Ashini Goupil (Aventures Ashini, 2005)





Source : D'après F.G. Speck.

Figure 1. Territorial distribution of Bands in Northern Quebec at the beginning of the 19th C. (Speck, 1931).

This paper also revisits the concepts of region and wilderness using the George River experience as a place of reflection and observation. It presents regions and landscapes as imagined spaces to explore the persistence of wilderness mythology in both historic and contemporary narratives of settlement, colonization and resource development. Canada continues to employ the idea of frontier as a tool of cultural power, to justify land appropriation by the South through resource exploitation in the North. Themes of home and adaptation to place that inform ideas about wilderness also run through the discussion, as does Canada's colonial legacy of displacement and sedentarization of Innu people. Classic environment-versus-development conflicts take their place beside an

ongoing discourse about cultural survival of Aboriginal people, making the resolution of such conflicts even more complex. This paper asks the question of how to mediate wilderness places in the Canadian imagination in a way that will allow Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures, and the land upon which they all depend, to flourish. It remains to be seen from where solutions to issues in the North will come: From collaboration between nations? From human rights and environmental justice as a moral imperative? From a new economy of energy as a response to global climate change? Or from the necessity of wilderness itself, a wilderness that still exists in places like the Mushuau-nipi?

Background

The territory of the Innu Nation is called Nitassinan, with most of the communities situated in the province of Québec and two Innu communities in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador [Figure 1]. Approximately 16,000 Innu (formerly known as Montagnais) inhabit Nitassinan. The Innu are not recognized under the Indian Act and therefore do not qualify for the same services and programs available to other First Nations. They have never surrendered their traditional territory nor their Aboriginal rights or sovereignty over their land.

In Canada, the Innu people are victims of colonization, first by missionaries and traders that forced settlement over nomadic livelihoods, then by federal and provincial governments that exercised assimilation policies through forced displacement of Innu communities (Denov and Campbell, 2002; Samson, 2003; Jacobs, 2001). Land theft, resource development, residential schools, racism and discrimination characterized this rapid sedentarization. Consequently, the Innu have lost language and culture, traditional hunting grounds and skills, rituals, family and a sense of purpose. As one Innu elder describes:

First the priests came to us in the country and finally convinced us to come out to the coast. Next the government gave us these houses. And then they built the school to teach the kids. That's where they really tied the rope on us you know. They taught the kids all the time and we couldn't take them into the country with us. After a while we started to forget about our way of living because the government ran so many things. Finally, they made us start to not want to go into the country. That's the situation they wanted to put us in.

Not too long ago, then, we controlled our own lives. When we were in the country we made decisions ourselves not the government. And this is Innu land, the place that is now called Labrador and

Québec, where not too long ago, we could hunt wherever we wanted without fear of the government (Antane and Kanikuen, 1984: 28).

In Utshimassit (Davis Inlet) during the 1950s and 1960s, for example, increased reliance on trade was accompanied by pressure from religious authorities to discourage families from going into 'the country' to practice traditional hunting and other ways of life. The crisis in Davis Inlet is enormously complex (Press, 1995). Both political and religious attempts were made "to radically transform the hearts, minds and movements of the Innu through their induction into processes of the state, sequestration of their lands for development, and the demand that they labour in the cash economy..." (Samson, 2003: 156). The community of Davis Inlet was relocated in 1948 and again in 1967 – two forced displacements that are still not understood by the people affected (Denov and Campbell, 2002). Current living conditions are often compared to those of developing nations; they include poor housing that lacks basic amenities of sewage, central heating or running water.

Development projects include logging and hydroelectric dams, military bases and mining. Since 1979, the Innu have had to contend with low-level military flight testing when the Canadian government decided to use the airspace over Innu land in Labrador to test their own fighter planes and those of allied NATO governments. The deafening noise levels have disrupted community life and caribou herds. The Innu are also concerned by the environmental and economic impacts of the mine in Voisey's Bay, where rich deposits of nickel were discovered in 1993. Both the Innu and the Inuit of Labrador have never ceded their land to any government, and are arguing that without a land claims settlement, these types of projects have no right to proceed. However, both Newfoundland and Québec governments have privileged development, such as logging and mining, over other land uses related to Aboriginal rights and land claims.

Seven of the nine Innu communities in Québec are now engaged in territorial negotiations for eventual self-determination through treaties under the Comprehensive Land Claims process. The Matimekoshe and Lac-John communities near Shefferville withdrew from the original Mamuitun Tribal Council negotiations in 1996. The other members of the Mamuitun Tribal Council (representing Mash-teuiatsh, Essipit, Betsiamites and the community of Nutashkuan) finally reached an agreement-in-principle in 2002. The basic principles include: the non-extinction of Aboriginal rights; the complete withdrawal of the Innu with regard to the Indian Act and the system of Indian reserves; the replacement of current reserves with a new territory called Innu Assi, which would fall

under the full authority of a local Innu government with its own constitution, legislative, executive and judicial powers; the preservation of rights to practice traditional activities within their full ancestral territories of Nitassinan; and financial compensation totaling \$360 million and payment of at least 6% from natural resource development fees paid to the government of Québec (Charest, 2003).

Despite these most recent prospects for some measure of equality and self-government, the systematic devastation of the natural, cultural and spiritual world of the Innu by successive state policies and development schemes has robbed them of their autonomy and shattered their identity and culture. In a study of the impact of displacement on the Innu of Labrador, Denov and Campbell (2002) attribute the loss of culture and identity to three phenomena: displacement from territorial land; assimilation through "education;" and destruction of the traditional economy. Moreover, the devastating effects of residential schools on previous generations have put children at risk of intergenerational trauma. These fundamental changes to Innu society have resulted in profound culture stress and self-destructive behaviours, among adults and children alike. These successive and cumulative traumas, experienced by whole communities as powerlessness, manifest themselves in individual acts of violence and self-destruction, such as abuse and suicide, and substance abuse of alcohol, drugs and solvents.

The actions of the Canadian state that have dispossessed Aboriginal peoples have created international human rights concerns. In 1999, the Canadian report to the United Nations Committee on Human Rights stated that the situation of Aboriginal peoples is "the most pressing human rights issue facing Canadians." However, the Committee responded with concern that Canada has not yet implemented the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples; without a greater share of lands and resources, institutions of Aboriginal self-government will fail (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). The Committee also emphasized that decisive and urgent action be taken towards the full implementation of the RCAP recommendations on land and resource allocation. The Committee also recommended that the practice of extinguishing inherent Aboriginal rights be abandoned as incompatible with article 1 of the Covenant.²

These glimpses into the experience of the Innu reveal the complex layers of political and cultural struggle, and the fundamental responsibility of non-Aboriginal people under the Canadian state to share power with Aboriginal communities equally in a nation-to-nation relationship, restore full access to traditional lands and resources, and empower Aboriginal people to regain so much of what has been lost.

The discussion in this paper aims to provide a critical interdisciplinary perspective on the concepts of regions, wilderness, frontier and landscape as they are used to describe places like Nitassinan and the North, which have been used to deny the experience and claims of Aboriginal people and exploit natural resources.

Regions as Imagined Landscapes

Canada is not only identified by a complex federal system of provinces and territories contending for power within the nation-state, but also by a distinct set of cultural compass bearings governed by the powerful and populous South. Patterns of historical resource development and settlement have created a cultural landscape of sub-national regions: the Maritimes, the Prairies, the West and the North. The concept of region as a geographically defined locale has been widely circulated and debated across disciplines. Innis (1930) first developed an economic history that explained Canada through its geography, where the fur trade drew diverse regions into a single economic network stretching along the St. Lawrence river, from east to west: the basis of his influential Laurentian thesis.

Subsequent studies in Canadian literature and the arts fuelled the notion that distinct regional topographies produced distinct cultural genres. Yet others, like Davey (1998: 6), reject the position that "...the landscape has – or should have – effects on the personalities and perspectives of its inhabitants..." for fear that regionalism might become politically oppressive. At the same time, the connection to land and place for many Aboriginal people is central to their identity and as a site of resistance may become politically empowering (Denov and Campbell, 2002). As notions of environmental determinism were gradually relinquished, regions came to be seen as social constructs with meanings inscribed into them through powerful myths and cultural symbols. The great white Canadian North, for example, contains persistent ideologies of racial difference that are naturalized through the hegemony of a settler society that developed in the south (Mackey, 2000; Grant, 1998). Where cultural identities are closely linked to the land, regionalism can become a vehicle for violent fragmentation (Rogoff, 2000). Likewise, forced displacement and cultural assimilation can turn violent fragmentation inward, as described above. Local communities and global economies now compete to occupy the same space, as in the case of extractive industries like forestry, mining and energy, operating in traditional Aboriginal territory. From this perspective, the North is not a region at all, but "a place for white men to dream about" (Brody, 1981: 29) on grounds that are constantly contested by Aboriginal occupants, environmentalists and industrial developers.

It follows that essentialized landscapes – such as wilderness and the North – can easily deny particular histories and local narratives. An idealized North can erase the painful and ongoing process of colonization of Aboriginal people. As Davey (1998) argues, some of the most successful regions in Canada, “– presenting themselves as inherently natural – have become new dominants, serving particular class, race and gender interests....” For example, Bordo (1993) observes how wilderness paintings by artists such as the Group of Seven deny the presence of Aboriginal inhabitants and obliterate the history of colonialism. In this case, landscape painting is a device to capture and lay claim, justifying settlement of ‘empty’ wilderness. The imagined emptiness of northern regions continues to serve the interests of resource developers. In a recent proposal to open the Alaskan Wildlife Refuge to oil drilling, one Senator suggested that, like a blank piece of paper, the North was “Frozen. Barren. Empty. ‘Nothing but snow and ice’” (Heuer, 2005) rather than a highly sensitive ecosystem in the Porcupine Caribou herd’s calving grounds that is already under severe strain from climate change and other impacts.

Politically then, regionalism is a fluid concept capable of concealing internal differences or exposing them, advancing particular political platforms or being negated by alternative identities, such as language or ethnicity. As Westfall (1980) and Brodie (1990) have remarked, the social construction of regions can be wielded by the nation to either unify or divide communities. Regions can create arguments for regional self-interest or regional economic difference, as evidenced in Canada’s provincial schisms, in the different services to rural and urban areas, and in the distribution of resources to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities.

Scholars such as Osborne (2001) promote regions as inclusive of the particular, sensitive to historical context, open to internal differentiation and people’s multiple identities. Rather than regions as immutable, these scholars recognize regions as dynamic myths and locations of meaning that may expand or contract, be newly created or destroyed. In Nunavut, for example, a collective regional identity emerged “...when certain historically contingent geographical and cultural features, materialized in the forms of symbols, are reinterpreted and mediated by actors and are instilled into the social fiber of a regional group of people” (Légaré, 2002: 81). As these authors show, regionalism is fluid enough to accommodate multiple identities and still offer insights into economic, political, social and cultural difference. In her book, *The Lure of the Local*, Lippard (1997) reasons that while places that are known and familiar do resonate, places have always changed and will continue to change. Local places are not pure and fixed entities, but are hybrid mixes that we constantly circulate through and between. The same might be said about Aboriginal

cultures that are not seeking a return to some pure and idealized traditional way of life, but rather are trying to reconcile living in two worlds (Buege, 1995).

Still, the politics of place remains one of the fundamental expressions of personal and cultural identity. Land and place continue to play an important role in people's everyday lives and a fundamental role in First Nations, Inuit and Innu land claims in Canada. McDowell's (1997) observation that people are constituted through place applies to Osborne's argument about identities as profoundly shaped by an experience and knowledge of place. Unlike virtual places, "...geography, locale, setting, place – whatever you wish to call them – are complicit in strategies of cultural survival. Places are defined by tangible material realities that can be seen, touched, mapped and located" (Osborne, 2001: 44). In land, Cosgrove (1984: 26) would argue, are deeply held myths, "the most powerful of them concern *rootedness*, ideas of home and belonging, of locality and identity...."

The real and symbolic struggles of identity politics are able to transcend geographical domains and move from the local to the global. As Friesen (2001) notes, trans-regional issues such as multiculturalism, sexuality, women's rights, sovereignty and Aboriginal rights have challenged the traditional ideas of region once held by geography, economic history, and Canadian literature. In some cases, localities can be mobilized by particular causes onto an international stage. Explosive conflicts such as old-growth logging in British Columbia make "little places like Clayoquot burst out of their containers and impose themselves on the world" (Magnusson and Shaw, 2002: 3). Similarly, the Cree of James Bay fought their battles on an international front, making North American consumer demand complicit in Hydro Québec's river dams for hydroelectricity. Like other Indigenous groups, they gained greater political traction by appealing to human rights, outside of the nation-state and far from a static region simply called 'the North.'

Nevertheless, we might ask why a northern regionalism has not developed in Canada to the extent of others. In the North-West, Davey (1998: 8) says it is "...because it has remained racially a white figuration, and unable to compete with the discourses of race and ethnicity which structure the Inuit and Dene figurations of land and politics." In spite of the rhetoric and reality of multiculturalism and the iconic status of its mosaic, Canada is stained by brutal elements of a colonial history. "In the more severe cases 'postcolonial' states have, almost from their founding moments... felt it necessary to deny the existence of minorities or to expel or murder large numbers of them, and subject their lands, culture and society to an enduring mode of internal colonialism..." (Sidaway,

2002: 19). In Canada, internal colonialism, some would argue, is expressed as a continued racial hegemony or meta-narrative of "whiteness" (Peake and Ray, 2001). Indeed, W.J.T. Mitchell (2000:1-2) reminds us that a landscape does not merely signify or symbolize power relations, but rather it is an instrument of cultural power. Thus, regions risk becoming ideological weapons, which can formally deny the process of their own social and political construction, colonizing a land and people without a trace.

The Wilderness Landscape

Perhaps only the idea of wilderness surpasses the troubled notion of regionalism in Canada. No other landscape has impressed itself upon the Canadian psyche and imagination as that of wilderness and its twin – the North. The Canadian Shield, the Barrens, and the Bush have been woven into the fabric of Canadian identity in order to distinguish the country from its British birth and its American influence. Like the malleable construct of region, the wilderness is also a fluid concept, at once intensely personal and yet also packaged for public consumption. In *Nastawgan: The Canadian North by Canoe and Snowshoe*, editors Hodgins and Hobbs (1987) define North as a territorially shifting entity and imaginative construct. The North cannot be located at specific latitudes. As urbanization and airlines expand, what was once remote can move dramatically and accessibly southward. The majestic George River is certainly remote by modern standards, but the 41,700 km² river basin is far from empty. Rather, the *Mushuau Shipu* is a place teeming with tundra life that has experienced continuous human occupation for some 8000 years (Loring and Ashini, 2000: 174), demonstrating that wilderness, as Careless (1989) remarked, is a relative term. Perhaps wilderness cannot be defined objectively (Tuan, 1977: 111) because it is not a state of nature, it is an imaginary human construct. "Ultimately, wilderness is a state of mind, a perception coloured by human biases and cultural values," Warecki (2000:2) remarks; "to some people a ravine is a wilderness; others demand larger, more remote areas." For still others, wilderness is simply their home.

Wilderness mythology has persisted for centuries, from the 'discovery' narratives of explorers to the contemporary discourse of ecotourism. In 1905, Mina Benson Hubbard undertook an expedition across Labrador, where she found "a sense of unspeakable relief in thus slipping away into the wilderness," freed from the constraints of society. She sought and found a "desolate grandeur" in her surroundings, concluding: "This was the wilderness indeed with only the crystal river and the beautiful skies to make it glad" (Hubbard, 2004 [1908]: 130). One hundred years later, tour

operators appeal to their clients who likewise seek the grandeur of wilderness. NORPAQ Adventures offers guided hunting and fishing trips along the George River. One of their clients recalls that "...to visit the Ungava wilderness and to participate, however ephemerally, in some of its natural mysteries... was a deeply human experience" (Mosher, 2006). About ending their trip, another client recalls (Kelly, 2006):

Saying goodbye has never come easy for me and leaving the caribou and their intriguing homeland was no exception. We were all filled with a great sorrow and each of us left a little bit of our hearts out there on the tundra. A week spent in truly wild, desolate country, living amongst caribou and feeling their presence quicken the pulse of life as this magical land touched parts of our being that we never knew or have forgotten existed. They are a magnificent animal, the Arctic's heart and soul, the lifeblood in a land where time stands still.

In an essay on nature and culture, Wadland (1987) shows the contradictory ways in which Canadian culture depends on wilderness. The paradox he says is that "the very immensity of land to which we are wedded, and which constitutes our geographical birthright, is at once alienated and alienating. We have never really learned the true meaning of adaptation to place, we have never found home" (13). Interestingly, this theme of settlement and adaptation runs through the literature on Canadian landscape. In *The Fur Trade*, Innis (1930: 383) noted the painful adaptation process for those trying to "work out new cultural traits suitable to a new environment." In a meditation on prairie settlement, Rees (1988: 160) identified that "[t]his sense of homelessness, or placelessness, is endemic to all pioneer societies." Such statements stand in stark contrast to Aboriginal claims of land as home, as described below.

Instead of acknowledging their mutual influence, natural and cultural landscapes stand in tension with one another within a settler paradigm; yet their facets intermingle in complex ways. Evernden (1992: 89) suggests that "before the word was invented, there was no nature." Yet there is a risk to privileging social constructs over cultural narratives and ecological realities. Campbell (2005: 202) argues that "[t]he danger with thinking of nature as a cultural 'construct' is that it reduces the physical world to an ephemeral cluster of cultural intangibles. Since we constructed it, it would seem to suggest that we can de-struct it or reconstruct it in any way we please...." Wilson (1991) dismantles the false dichotomy between nature and culture, calling us instead to dwell in place, in a way that is ecologically responsible. His call is compelling because it is contingent; it recognizes that sense of place and values resonate differently across generations, classes and cultures. Wilson

exposes the lie that culture is somehow separate, or independent, from nature – a view shared by many Aboriginal traditions.

As a cultural landscape then, the George River of Northern Québec may not be a region, frontier or wilderness at all, but homeland that the Innu have shaped, and been shaped by, for countless generations. Environmental historian, Claire Campbell (2005: 202) points out that “[p]eople and nature continually respond to and redefine one another. We need to be able to distinguish where humans have imposed on the environment and where they have adapted to it, and recognize that a landscape is a product of both dynamics.” Hence, the North is not simply a human idea: it is both social construct and autonomous process.

In my imagination, the George River is an immense and pristine landscape – marked, but unchanged, by human presence. At the Mushuau-nipi, *le lac de la terre sans arbres*, I am awed by how the expanse of tundra rises up to meet an equally vast sky. Despite the incongruity of satellite telephones, a generator, and the occasional float plane overhead, I can still experience this as a wild place. From the ancient stones that once encircled tipis and the joyful strain of activities like skinning caribou and picking berries at camp, I can appreciate this place as home. I also sense a deep struggle for survival that has been enacted all around me – by the caribou and by the Innu – both in the past and in the present. If wilderness is experience, then to me, the Mushuau-nipi is a wilderness and a home. Yet, I have found home in a place where I will never live. William Cronon provides one answer to this dilemma; he states that: “Far from being the one place on earth that stands apart from humanity, [wilderness] is quite profoundly a human creation.... As we gaze into the mirror it holds up for us, we too easily imagine that what we behold is nature when in fact we see the reflections of our own longings and desires” (Cronon, 1995: 70).

Nothing captures the themes of longing and desire, conquest and colonization better than the notion of frontier. They are placeless, empty, no man’s land, awaiting development. The frontier has been conceptualized as a moving margin between settled territory and primeval wilderness; a socio-economic and cultural space between civilization and savagery. In North America, the West is simultaneously a geographic region and a process of encountering the exotic other. Frontiers advance the mythology of empty land (Rowe, 1990; Rees, 1988) and narrate the discourses of progress. An expansion of ‘culture’ and ‘civilization’ into nature is precisely what Mitchell (2000: 10) sees as the ‘dreamwork of imperialism.’ Frederick Jackson Turner’s (1983) concept of frontier applies to Canada differently than in the United States; here it represents “...progressive infringements on the native wilderness and its peoples...”

(Careless, 1989: 38). The frontier in America cultivated an agrarian heartland and expected to reap democracy, liberty, and individualism. In Canada, self-sustenance was much harder to achieve for settlers due to climate. Instead, the new country harvested fish, fur, lumber, wheat and minerals: consuming the Aboriginal cultures that had shaped it and the wilderness landscape which had defined it.

The relationship between hinterland and metropolis provides further insight into the theme of northern regions and wilderness. Since the growing metropolis was economically dependent on extracting staples trades from the hinterland, "...Canada took shape through successive occupation of frontiers, the forward margins of an acquisitive society reaching out to fresh areas of resources" (Careless, 1989: 9). *Consuming Canada* is thus an apt title for a collection of readings in environmental history (Gaffield and Gaffield, 1995). In the case of Ontario, Smith (1990) shows how wilderness itself became a resource that served rapid industrialization, both materially and symbolically. Viewed first as a threat and an obstacle to overcome, the Canadian landscape was then subdued through agriculture and the survey grid. The normal and natural life was seen as one of rigorous exposure to nature to build Canadian character (as epitomized by boys' summer camps). Wilderness was then called upon for a few days a year to be a refuge for city dwellers on holiday. According to Smith (1990), people no longer required wilderness after the Group of Seven began to paint: images of wilderness replaced the need for experience. Contemporary urban dwellers have a similar relationship with the land, he argues, supporting attractive images of wilderness preservation that they may never see. This dialectical relationship of wilderness and metropolis, with frontier as the mediator and gate to the unknown North, has had a profound impact on 21st century ideas about the land.

Our Home and Native Land

Such historical and contemporary cultural narratives of land – of wilderness and the North – are central to any understanding of Canada's development and quest for identity. Identity myths, like those assigned to the North, according to Grant (1998), are particularly strong when based on environmental determinism that links particular landscape characteristics to the cultures that inhabit them. The North was believed to impart unique qualities of hardiness, determination, independent spirit, and innovation to the Canadians huddled along its southern border. Perhaps one of the reasons why the wilderness myth persists is because 80% of the population currently lives in urban centres and the majority have never lived, let alone travelled, to the North. Grant (1998: 39) is right to suggest that "[f]or Southerners the Arctic represents 'otherness' in the form of an

unfamiliar landscape." The practice of "othering" – savages, primitives, aliens and immigrants – pervades Canadian history and helps to defy assumptions about a postcolonial present.

Warkentin and Podruchy (2001) aim to go beyond a critique of the cultural hegemony created by reducing "others" to Western categories by scrutinizing the categories themselves. They set aside the frontier thesis of F. J. Turner and the popular centre-periphery model of Canadian development (i.e., as a colony of Britain or as economic dependent of the U.S.) in favour of mapping cultural centres in North America during the Renaissance. Their work (2001: 11) shows that contemporary Canada "...uncannily resembles the underlying pattern of Native habitation before contact: a widespread group of active and highly differentiated societies linked by lengthy trading networks." Early maps by F.G. Speck (1931) delineated formal divisions between bands of Cree, Inuit, Naskapi, and Innu [Figure 2], although networks were more fluid in order to permit the exchange of ideas, materials, and the taking of marriage partners as evidenced by archeological discoveries of a strong quartz material called chert, traded from Ramah Bay, Labrador (Fitzhugh, 1977). Despite extensive trading networks from the Atlantic to James Bay and beyond, bands did occupy territories that roughly corresponded to river basins and did develop distinct languages and dialects. In the most recent maps of Nitassinan, settlement communities exist like scars on a vast traditional hunting territory. Perhaps Innis (1930) was correct in saying that Canada was shaped *because* of its geography, not in spite of it. Regionalism, if it existed at all, was a geographic necessity that tied people to particular landscapes and described associated harvest grounds, trading partners and nodes of contact and exchange between *pre-wilderness* societies.

Wilderness has oft met the charge that it is an ethnocentric idea, born into the myth of Western progress and perpetuated as part of an imperial ideology. In an essay on wilderness and empire, Cosgrove (1984: 27-41) argues that, as a North American concept, wilderness is a white idea. Rothenberg (1995) agrees that wilderness takes three dominant forms: an imperial notion, an urban recreation value and a constraint to Aboriginal development. Resource development rarely produces many long-term benefits for the people most affected, as many critics have noted. More often development projects disrupt Aboriginal livelihoods and communities in profound ways. Usher (2003) insists that, in Canada, the alteration of river systems (e.g., James Bay), the pollution and contamination of ecosystems (e.g., Grassy Narrows), and the depletion of wildlife (e.g., Burnt Church) have transformed the environment on a massive scale, unravelling the spiritual and economic foundations of many Aboriginal communities.

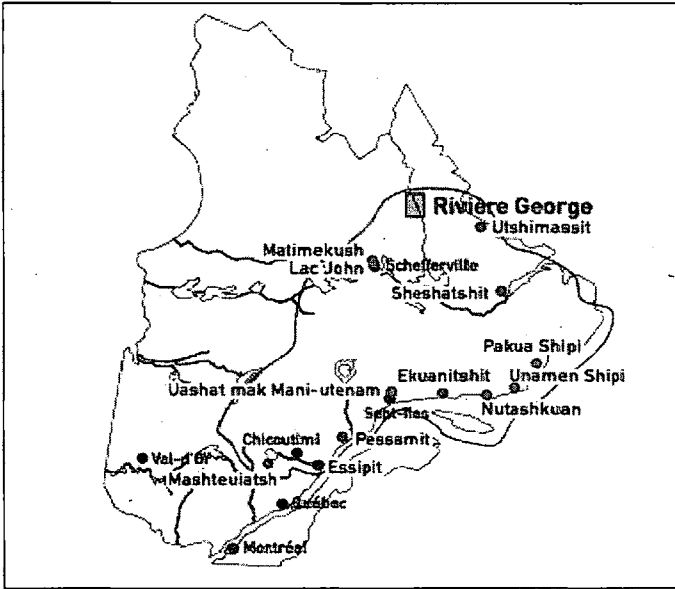


Figure 2. Nitassinan: the Innu Nation of Quebec and Labrador (Aventures Ashini, 2005)

In Nitassinan, the rapid encroachment of white settlers and their values forever altered a way of life. Indeed, the development of the Churchill Falls hydroelectric dam in 1973 erased more than the great Michikamau river, but flooded “hereditary Innu hunting grounds, traditional Innu travel routes, gathering places, burial sites, traplines, and, most striking of all [silenced] the thunder of the great falls...” (Grace, 2004: lxxii). Similarly, the iron ore mines in Schefferville, Labrador City and Wabush, the shipping terminus at Sept-Îles, the military base at Goose Bay, and the Voisey’s Bay nickel mine seized vast quantities of land from the Innu, although no treaties have yet been concluded. In response to the staggering energy demands in the province (already the highest per capita consumption in the world), more hydroelectric development of Northern Québec is on the horizon. The George River contains some of the largest hydroelectric potential in Québec (2400 MW) and is the home of one of the world’s largest caribou herds. The film, *Laisser couler le Nord* (Odysée Ungava, 2006), raises the question of how energy conservation might be fundamentally linked to the preservation of Ungava: the last of the great river basins in North America that is still intact.

Environmental racism in Canada, such as that caused by many northern developments, ensures that already marginalized Aboriginal communities are kept on the periphery of the national and global economy. Colonial history portrayed a desolate North for exploitation, but despite

all evidence to the contrary, the myth of an empty northern wilderness prevails. A colonial mentality still pervades Canadian society, as seen in our "...stereotypes that inform our conceptions of the Arctic and the people who live there and we still lust after the rich resources hidden below the Arctic landscape" (Buege, 1995: 83). Investments in oil and gas development, including new minefields, offshore drilling and oil sands extraction, shows how "[i]n Canada, we have adjusted our colonial actions, not abandoned them" (Buege, 1995: 83). Therefore, environmental justice must help to define a new discourse, both for Aboriginal people and to ensure social and economic equality as a defining feature of sustainable communities.

Perhaps one of the most effective ways of defining Western notions of wilderness is by contrasting them with Aboriginal people's ideas of homeland. In 1977, Justice Berger's report on the proposed Mackenzie Valley Pipeline was entitled *Northern Frontier – Northern Homeland*. For the first time, it presented a public challenge to the idea of wilderness as an empty frontier and introduced the reality of northern, primarily Aboriginal, homelands. Kulchyski (1998) distinguishes uninhabited wilderness from inhabited bush. To him, "wilderness is a concept developed by Western civilization to designate its spatial other... 'Wilderness' marks a never achievable space, since the presence of people in any part of it renders it non-wild" (Kulchyski, 1998: 21). In the same volume, McCormack (1998: 28) argues that the term homeland is underdeveloped in theory and that wilderness and homeland are two fundamentally different paradigms that can coexist only if they are mediated, not simply joined together as in the Berger report. For people like the Innu, homeland is a real landscape charged with meaning, a source of sustenance and social structure (Jacobs, 2001).

For many Aboriginal people, the term wilderness (defined as devoid of people) lacks meaning and validity since land has been occupied from time immemorial and is inseparable from its inhabitants (Doxtator, 2001). For example, "from an Inuk's perspective, the concept of the Arctic as wilderness is a fragment of an outsider's imagination; unsupported by history or experience.... To qualify as wilderness, one must erase not only the Inuit people from the landscape, but all traces of their history as well" (Grant, 1998: 28). Mackey (2000) posits that Canada's official wilderness identity is dependent on a politics of erasure, appropriation and exclusion. Bordo (1993) makes a similar argument about Canadian landscape artists systematically eliminating Aboriginal people from their own colonial representations of wilderness.

From this perspective, the colonial production of space can be interrogated in order to "destabilize imaginative geographies of empire," as

Sidaway (2002) asks of us. Lefebvre's (1974) spatial trialectic helps to expose the power of a colonial legacy in Canada that produces and reproduces symbolic landscapes – the true North strong and free. It also shows how alternative landscapes, such as homeland or the bush, are constructed to resist an essentialized white North. Since the reality of the geographic North is not available to most Canadians, their lived experience absorbs the dominant mythology to create their perceived experience and national identity. In other words, although land is real, landscape “is a projection of human consciousness, an image received” (Porteous, 1990: 4). Dominant representations of the North, both within and outside of Canada, project an empty wilderness that masks the reality of the appropriation of Aboriginal lands and ongoing resource exploitation in permafrost regions.

Innu Aitun: Traditional Ecological Knowledge

Increasingly, Aboriginal people's understandings about the land are shared through traditional ecological knowledge. The Dene Cultural Institute (1995) defines traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) as the body of knowledge or natural history built up by a group of people through generations of living in close contact with nature. It includes a system of classification, a set of empirical observations about the local ecology, and a system of self-management that governs hunting, trapping and fishing. Berkes (1999) adds that it is a form of knowledge that is typically qualitative, intuitive, holistic, moral, spiritual and produces diachronic data (i.e., long time-series from one locality). Scientific ecology, by contrast, is concerned with verifying predictions to generate principles that will inform theory and is often applied to specific management problems. Despite some stark epistemological differences, most scholars advocate for TEK to complement traditional scientific practices (Inglis, 1993; Orton, 1995) because they offer each other different strengths.

Since the 1970s, TEK has been collected through land use and occupancy studies (Brody, 1992). It gained greater attention in environmental impact assessments and their widely critiqued public consultation process. TEK has a long history of being sought by researchers and extracted in, at best, a paternalistic fashion. Aboriginal people have been the subject of study, first by explorers and missionaries, then social scientists, government agencies and industry. In these scenarios, TEK is exploited for research and exported, with little relevance to the residents (Dene Cultural Institute, 1995; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Unresolved issues include questions of knowledge ownership and intellectual property rights, compensation for sharing TEK, and the charge that traditional knowledge cannot be separated from its holder or context. Some people

also worry that with the loss of languages in an oral culture, TEK will be lost (Tsuji, 1996; Hébert, 2006). Increasingly, Aboriginal people themselves are drawing on their cultural knowledge for projects such as oral history databases, wildlife monitoring, and curriculum development. TEK continues to be a key part of land use negotiations, the co-management of resources, and collaborative studies on climate change. Community-based monitoring projects, like the one in Kativik that tracks the effects of climate change as it relates to safe travel over ice, "aim to help communities develop a set of adaptation strategies based on both traditional and scientific knowledge..." (Kativik Regional Government, 2006).

Some descriptions of TEK contrast idealized Indigenous worldviews with an oversimplified industrial paradigm. Unfortunately, these types of comparisons tend to buttress the essentialization of cultures and perpetuate deeper stereotypes of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, rather than providing a close examination of what could be truly sustainable in both models. As Sidaway (2002) suggests, colonialism is a two-way street. The binary of Indigenous/Western risks obscuring complex internal colonialisms and the multidirectional effects of power. Contemporary authors may still idealize Aboriginal relations with nature and each other, despite strong evidence that humanized landscapes dominated the Americas for centuries prior to Columbus (Denevan, 1992; Cook, 1995). Despite this, a history of romantic mythology around the "ecologically noble savage" living in harmony with nature has persisted to the present. Many scholars now acknowledge historic patterns of both sustainable and unsustainable harvests and the profound influence of industrial modernization on Indigenous cultures. They would resist idealizing "traditional" livelihoods and worldviews that have been so altered by Western imperialism.

The North is also fraught with a complex nature/culture dichotomy. As Grant's (1998) work shows, it can be difficult to avoid the strict cultural duality entrenched in Canadian identity. On the one hand, she says: "[The Inuit] do not set themselves apart from the natural world...the environment is the very essence of their being, a concept at odds with the anthropocentric views of the Western world" (Grant, 1998: 27). On the other hand, since the time of "contact" (another contested term) Aboriginal cultures have been changed by European social, religious and economic practices that altered their environment and their culture. Buege (1995) recognizes that guns, vehicles, television, and rapid resource developments have all significantly altered northern Aboriginal lifestyles in a short period of time. To argue otherwise is to "undermine the self-determination of a people" (Buege, 1995: 84). Grant ends by advocating an alternative view of the North as a series of struggles – cultural, economic, political and physical – in an unforgiving and, one might add, rapidly changing environment.

The expression "Traditional Ecological Knowledge" itself is contested for the very reason that the word "traditional" is so ambiguous and fails to acknowledge that all cultures are constantly in flux. Some prefer the phrase Indigenous Ecological Knowledge to define the knowledge of human/nature relations more broadly (Berkas, 1999; Stevenson, 1996). In an Indigenous paradigm, however, humans *are* nature and thus some prefer the simple phrase: knowledge of the land. Yet more is required than a simple joining of Indigenous and scientific knowledge; again, different paradigms require mediation.

Innu-Aitun is translated as Innu know-how. It embodies both epistemology and ontology. Clammer *et al.* 2004:149-150 note that in classic political theory, modern liberal societies establish an informal agreement for tolerance by the stronger and compliance by the weaker. However, when the hegemon lays down ontologically-based rules, that are not understood and are non-negotiable, this negotiation fails. Indigenous peoples are then subject to 'policing' by 'advisers, helpers and administrators,' usually of the state. When they try to comply with these rules, the result is breakdown of the sense of identity, signalled by sharp increases in forms of social deviance, illness and suicide. Fortunately, Clammer *et al.* (2004) have observed that healing is possible through withdrawal and restoration of sources of identity; reducing the pressure exerted by an alien ontology; and authoring of new selves. The potential exists for some sense of mutual comprehension between competing cultures. Alternative institutions founded on minority ontologies, without risk to – or from – mainstream society may be possible.

Buege (1995: 86) proposes another alternative: he says that environmentally responsible knowledge is urgently needed among ordinary citizens and decision-makers, but that those formerly ignored should be listened to and respected. Since epistemologies usually ignore individual knowers, a whole new area concerned with local knowledge has been opened. Scholars in the sociology of science resist the hegemony of expert science and argue for the value of local knowledges held by the diverse inhabitants of particular places, especially that of elders and old-timers.

With the use of traditional ecological knowledge so contested, is there a useful way forward? Currently Aboriginal knowledge systems are marginalized by a dominant narrative, despite the evidence that Aboriginals and Europeans communicated many ideas across cultures and shaped each other; not separate and parallel like the two row Wampum, but intertwined (Doxtator, 2001). An enormous body of work shows the inherent value of alternatives to the Western industrial-capitalist paradigm. Many non-Aboriginal people are interested in adopting selected principles of an Indigenous paradigm that support sustainability

without appropriating Aboriginal culture. The applied value of TEK has yet to be fully appreciated by science for understanding environmental change. Documents such as the *First Nations of Québec and Labrador Research Protocol* are instrumental in redefining how knowledge is shared. The Protocol requires that researchers adopt a community-based, participatory approach that is action-oriented, critical of a Eurocentric bias and respectful of Aboriginal paradigms (Assembly of the First Nations of Québec and Labrador, 2005). Since both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people have information, experience and knowledge to share, a dialogue is needed that builds responsible ecological knowledge across nations.

The George River: Prospects for Building Ecological Knowledge

In his book, *Being Caribou*, Karsten Heuer (2005) describes the prospect of oil drilling in the calving grounds of the Porcupine caribou herd within the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. He describes it as a classic environment-versus-development conflict, where advocates of the caribou are pitted against decision-makers in Washington and Ottawa. However, these conflicts are seldom so simple, as Heuer acknowledges from his discussions with northern residents wanting jobs and other economic benefits. Set in traditional Aboriginal territory, the calving grounds also span U.S. and Canadian borders, adding to the complexity of decision-making. This particular conflict has transgressed its physical location, gaining public attention across North America and throughout the world.

By contrast, the George River, similarly at risk of industrial development, and similarly complex (crossing through Québec and Labrador, through traditional Innu territories without land claim settlement) has not attracted the same kind of public attention. However, this may change as advocates such as Odyssée Ungava (and their film *Laisser couler le Nord*) expose the ecological consequences of energy consumption in the province of Québec and elsewhere, issuing an urgent plea for conservation and alternative energy policies.

For the second year in a row, The Northern Aboriginal Seminar brought 30 participants together to listen and learn from Innu elders and political leaders. They also came to share their own perspectives from conservation, science, law, academe, social work, government, media, archaeology, environmental activism and tourism. Organizers, Serge Ashini Goupil and Jean-Philippe Messier, explicitly linked the theme of the seminar to the physical site of debate: a traditional meeting place for exchange, but in the context of contemporary environmental issues. The theme proposed that "The Solution Will Stem from Collaboration Between Nations," and

indeed, the discussions regarding climate change, cultural change, solidarity and collaboration were stimulating and often profound.

Two major outcomes of the conference were the incorporation of a non-profit organization, *Les Amis du Mushuau-nipi*, and proposals for the designation of the George River as a site of significant natural and cultural heritage. The mission of *Les Amis* was articulated as follows: to enhance, promote and protect the cultural, archaeological and natural characteristics of the Mushuau-nipi in view of making it an exceptional place of exchange between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, especially of environmental and social issues. Its five main objectives are:

1. conservation of biodiversity, archaeological sites and cultural values related to ancestral practices;
2. promotion of a unique site of exchange for reconciliation between Nations and for reflection about environmental solutions;
3. promotion of Aboriginal practices and ecotourism activities in the territory;
4. increase public awareness of the Mushuau-nipi and its peoples; and,
5. environmental clean-up and restoration of contaminated sites.

Current ecological and archeological research supports conservation efforts, however much more is needed. For example, long-term studies on caribou calving are needed to better understand the George River caribou herd, whose population fluctuations remain largely unexplained (Hamelin, 1973; Russell et al., 2002; Berkes, 1998). While the herd is still disturbed by low-level flying from NATO (at 800 km/hr and at elevations of only 30 m), most flying occurs when the animals are not present. However, calf survival is linked to the presence of jet flights and given the recent expansion of the calving grounds toward the fly zone, more research will be needed.

The fate of the George River caribou is as much a question for science as it is a complex question for governance. Wildlife biologist, Fred Harrington (in Russell *et al.*, 2002: 34), explains that:

...the border of the calving grounds spans the border between Québec and Labrador, and there is no coordinated management of the George River herd, it is unclear where the management responsibilities lie in the event that the population begins to decline and action needs to be taken. This is of particular concern to the Inuit [and Innu] of the area whose lifestyle depends on the caribou.

Similarly, with regards to industrial development, Harrington (in Russell et al., 2002: 30) note that “Labrador has no protection measures in place

that would safeguard the herd's calving grounds in the event of a major resource discovery." In Québec, major resource discoveries are anticipated and encouraged through the ministère des Ressources naturelles et Faune (MRNF) (Ministry of Natural Resources and Wildlife). The Ministry has a complex mandate. On the one hand, a major effort is given to satellite telemetry of the Leaf and George River caribou herds, in partnership with the Canadian Department of National Defense and Hydro Québec (MRNF, 2006a). On the other hand, major efforts are also put toward the promotion of mineral exploration. The Ministry produces interpretive geological maps for prospective explorers and publicly states (MRNF, 2006b):

The Québec government supports the development of the mining industry by building partnerships with mining companies. Furthermore, the government offers a stable and reliable mining regime as well as a particularly attractive mining taxation system.

Such contradictions stand in stark contrast within a single departmental mandate, when in fact they are woven into almost every aspect of modern life, precariously unsustainable in its reliance on the new frontiers of fossil fuels. To this end, ecological knowledge is required as urgently as institutional reforms that might integrate and mediate conventionally distinct jurisdictions, such as wildlife and natural resources.

The second outcome of the Northern Aboriginal Seminar (2006) was a proposal to investigate the options for both legal and symbolic protection of the George River. As mentioned above, political jurisdictions (and the lack of treaty settlement) make governance of this vast landscape particularly challenging. Possible designations include provincial park, aquatic reserve, biodiversity reserve, national park, Canadian Heritage River, UNESCO world heritage site or biosphere reserve, or an Innu designation in development (Ashini, pers comm., 2006). But given the vast territory of the caribou (a 100,000 km range) and the length of the river (515 km from Lake Cabot to Kangisualujjuaq), such mechanisms may be difficult, if not impossible, to apply. Beyond the physical nature of the river, these mechanisms must respect Innu rights to their land and ongoing land claims as well as support the livelihoods of tourism operators, such as *Aventures Ashini* and *NORPAQ Adventures*. As Francis (2003 : 233) observes, important areas of biodiversity are often associated with Indigenous peoples who have maintained traditional ecological knowledge associated with hunter-gatherer cultures. However, he also notes the challenges of imposing protected area designation on Aboriginal lands in so-called "frontier" regions. Francis (2003: 233) explains that:

The imposition of some formally recognized protected area by an external authority representing a dominant culture can only be done effectively if the Indigenous peoples' traditional rights to the areas they occupy are also acknowledged, if cultural resource-use practices are allowed to continue, and if Indigenous people retain a significant control over decisions affecting the area.

Given the complexity of land use conflicts and management options for protected areas in the North generally, and for the George River specifically, more research on these various governance arrangements and reconciliation mechanisms will be required. Continued dialogue between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people will also be required in order to mediate such complex issues and begin to apply integrated traditional and scientific ecological knowledge.

Conclusion

As this interdisciplinary review on regions, the North and wilderness landscapes shows, identification to place is a powerful basis for identity formation and subsequent social organization. The experience of wilderness and the North, as imaginary or as homeland, appears fundamental to shaping identity; it has fuelled centuries of political discourse about discovery and development. In historic and contemporary narratives of Canada, wilderness mythology prevails. Evident in numerous environment-versus-development conflicts, Canada employs the idea of frontier as a tool of cultural power to justify land appropriation by the South through resource exploitation in the North. However, the discussion also highlights the convergence of discourses on environment and Aboriginal development, and hints at new themes of environmental justice, sustainable livelihoods and protected landscapes.

While debates about social and economic equality for Aboriginal people continue, and several worthy initiatives are underway, those voices are easily drowned out or distorted by the dominant culture. Indeed, in Québec and the rest of Canada, northern development is an old story, one that fails to resonate with people reaping the benefits of rivers, forests and minerals as part of a much larger and complex economy. The Northern Aboriginal Seminars provide a radically different framework for mediating different paradigms about wilderness and home, North and South. They attempt, and may succeed, at reconciling some of the complex contradictions about northern wilderness in Nitassinan and perhaps elsewhere in Canada.

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Notes

1. Frost Centre for Canadian Studies and Native Studies, Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario K9J 7P4.
2. The United Nations Covenant on Civil and Political Rights Article 1. All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development. Article 2. All peoples may, for their own ends, freely dispose of their natural wealth and resources without prejudice to any obligations arising out of international economic co-operation, based upon the principle of mutual benefit, and international law. In no case may a people be deprived of its own means of subsistence. United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1976.

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