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red-headed woodpecker

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Northern discovery

A canoe trip through Ontario's Far North
reveals an uncertain future

LISTEN TO THE LAND

Most people see Ontario's Far North as a pristine wilderness or a natural-resource storehouse. For many First Nations people, however, this dichotomy is a false one. A canoe journey through this remote region reveals what ecological integrity means to people who have lived here for millennia – and their passionate fight to protect it.

Text and photography by Conor Mihell





From the look in his eyes, I know the old man has something important to say. The previous day, when my wife, Kim, and I arrived in Neskantaga, a remote First Nation village of 300 in northwestern Ontario, Leo Moonias accepted our gifts of tobacco and sweetgrass – sacred First Nations medicines – and welcomed us to his community with food, tea and stories about the watery wilderness that gave birth to his culture at the end of the last ice age. Now, as we leave to continue our 24-day canoe trip to James Bay, the 72-year-old elder pulls us aside.

“I will be thinking of you on the river,” he says. His eyes match the chocolatey colour of the waterway as his gaze shifts between me and Kim. “Every morning, I will be leaving tobacco for you.”

The moment is far more significant than the impeccable campsites, wildlife sightings and thrilling whitewater we have experienced on our trip so far. But it is also bittersweet. Leo’s life is tied to a landscape on the precipice of change. The waters we are paddling bisect the Ring of Fire, a crescent-shaped cluster of mining claims that has been called Ontario’s oil sands, where an estimated \$60 billion in chromite, an element used to produce stainless steel, comprises “the most promising mining opportunity in Canada in a century,” according to former premier Dalton McGuinty. But a scientific panel has also described this landscape as a “stronghold of biodiversity” – and “one of the world’s largest, most intact ecological systems.” Soon it may be severed by roads and scarred by mines.

Before we reach James Bay, we have another 600 kilometres to cover through the bewildering twists, turns and countless islands of Attawapiskat Lake, down the powerful Attawapiskat River and across one of the largest boreal forests on the planet. We are excited but also apprehensive. Leo senses this. “You will see eagles,” he says, smiling genially. “The eagle sees everything. Remember, the eagle will always be watching you.”

Our fear evaporates with the knowledge that we have an ally in this gentle, earnest man. In the ensuing days, his words will inspire us to see the Far North through a different lens – not as the pristine wilderness utopia or the resource-rich El Dorado of outsiders’ view, but as someone’s home. Leo and his relatives have lived in northern Ontario for millennia, but their impact on the land has been limited to campsites, gravesites, portage trails and rough-hewn cabins. Sturgeon, caribou and wolverine – species all but eradicated from the rest of Ontario – persist and thrive here. The indigenous lifestyle of trapping, hunting and fishing

→ **River ride:** The author and his wife feel the rush of white water.



NOVA CRAFT CANOE

“The sense of isolation is palpable as we paddle around the first curve of the Otoskwini and the road disappears from view.”

might not mesh with an environmentalist's take on nature preservation, yet these are essential elements in a culture that has sustained ecological integrity here for thousands of years.

In short, we are learning to listen to the land.

OUR JOURNEY STARTS in Pickle Lake, an end-of-the-road town 500 kilometres north of Thunder Bay. “Pickle” is the gateway to Ontario's vast, 450,000-square-kilometre Far North. This roadless area lures canoeists with its sprawling lakes – Savant, Seul and Big Trout – and countless rivers flowing like capillaries to Arctic tidewater. We planned to descend the Otoskwini River to the Attawapiskat, one of five large rivers that tumble off the Canadian Shield and cross the interminable muskeg of the James Bay Lowlands, and then fly home from the coastal community of Attawapiskat.

The sense of isolation is palpable as we paddle around the first curve of the Otoskwini and the road disappears from view. A moose wades across the river from our first campsite; on day two, we startle a swimming black bear. Later, we spot a pair of golden eagles soaring above our heads. Each rugged portage and whitewater rapid adds another layer of separation from the civilized world.

After a week on the Otoskwini, swift water flushes us into 40-kilometre-long Attawapiskat Lake, where the tenor of our expedition suddenly changes. From a sandy campsite, we watch a series of motorized canoes buzz across the lake. The sound of shotguns erupting in the distance is jarring, but also reassuring. As the canoes roar back across the lake at twilight, we know people will be eating well tonight.

“We go out in the canoes day in and day out,” says Peter Moonias, the chief of Neskantaga First Nation who, along with his older brother, Leo, welcomes us to the Oji-Cree community's annual summer festival, a four-day celebration of fishing derbies, dances, bingo and feasts that begins the following morning.

Neskantaga is exemplary of the northern lifestyle. A recent Ontario Nature survey of 588 northern residents in

both First Nations and non-First Nations communities found that half spend more than 20 hours per week on the land and waters. In fact, almost nine in 10 reported having “a very strong relationship” with the landscape, “a deep knowledge of plants, fish and animals that live in the area, and [a familiarity] with what the changes in season bring.” Locals also know that their forest and freshwater food supplies are threatened; the vast majority of these people identify forestry, mining, hydroelectric development and industrial pollution as causes of habitat loss.

Food security in the north has many benefits: healthier diets, stronger local economies, and lower costs (environmental and otherwise) because less food is imported from elsewhere. Vital fish and wildlife populations and abundant berry and mushroom crops are indicative of intact ecosystems, says Alex Boulet, coordinator of Ontario Nature's Forest and Freshwater Foods Project in the region. “When it comes to meeting basic [human] needs, resilient local food systems and clean water are right up there on the top of the list of necessities,” he says.

At first, the ubiquitous rifles, fishnets, motorized canoes and snowmobiles of Neskantaga seem incongruous with conservation. But Chief Moonias's son, Derek, explains that these tools are part of an elemental, hand-to-mouth relationship with nature governed by a shrewd concept of sustainability. “We harvest fish and animals for food, not sport,” he says. “Elders like Leo to set the quotas. When you hit the quota, you go home. You never set your net in one place for too long. You leave it there for a while, then you move it. That way, if you need 10 fish, you get five from one place and five from another.”

Bimaadiziwin – “the good life” on the land and water – remains central to the community's identity. “When I need to heal, I go out there,” says Derek, motioning toward Attawapiskat Lake. “The elders tell us stories of those who have gone before us. We follow them in the bush.”

All of which explains why the prospect of an industrial juggernaut moving in instills panic in communities like Neskantaga. “We still get our food from the land,” says Chief Moonias. “We'd be 70 kilometres from an open pit and the water has to go somewhere.”

These days, land-use planning puts the emphasis on development. Under the current system, people who rely on hunting, fishing and foraging for food have to “make a case for why logging or mining should be curtailed to accommodate these other values,” says Boulet. To make their concerns heard, northern residents have to navigate a complex public consultation process.

Boulet, a Thunder Bay-based gardener and forager with a background in anthropology and education, is working to

→ **Lunch break:** Replenishing calories burned on the river.



→ **Community spirit:** (from left to right) Chief Peter Moonias and his brother Leo of Neskantaga First Nation, and Cree trapper John Tomagatick of Attawapiskat First Nation.

shift the burden onto developers by raising awareness of the importance of healthy forest and aquatic ecosystems to the northern food supply. “We should put the focus on people who live on the land,” he argues. “If this is the priority, the impetus would be on industry to prove why we shouldn’t protect the land.”

Like most chiefs in the 34 communities scattered throughout Ontario’s Far North, Chief Moonias does not fully oppose mining on his traditional land. But he is offended by companies’ brazen incursion into his territory and frustrated by the Ontario government’s attempts to impose its own regulations on his homeland. “We want to do the land-use planning ourselves,” he says. “Environmental issues need to be addressed in ways that satisfy our people. If something goes wrong, we can’t just move to Thunder Bay or Toronto and start a new life.”

The nine Matawa First Nations, including Neskantaga, have formed an environmental services group to measure basic ecological parameters as yet unstudied in this vast territory, such as water chemistry, to better inform the First Nations’ responses to development.

Chief Moonias is resolved that the Ring of Fire will not be developed without First Nations’ consent. He made national news two years ago when, in a statement directed at Cliffs Natural Resources, a United States-based mining company with the largest stake in the Ring of Fire, he stated, “They will have to kill me first before they cross the Attawapiskat River.” Neskantaga is accessible only by air, winter ice road

and canoe. “Once there is a permanent access road, our way of life will be changed forever,” Chief Moonias announced in 2012. “We will not be able to turn back the clock.”

AS WE PADDLE, the Ring of Fire scrolls by as a panorama of black spruce, sphagnum moss and fractured limestone rock. Amid the silence, we are startled to hear someone hail us from the clay shoreline. Harry Baxter runs a sport-fishing outpost here, cut into a grassy clearing the size of a suburban backyard, surrounded by a sea of stunted spruce and tangled alder, and plagued by droves of mosquitoes. For 50 years, the Baxters have guided a dedicated clientele of mostly U.S. anglers and hunters in search of trophy northern pike and moose.

“You can stay with us,” says Harry, a slender, 22-year-old

“ We harvest fish and animals for food, not sport. Elders like Leo set the quotas. When you hit the quota, you go home. You never set your net in one place for too long. You leave it there for a while, then you move it. ”

Oji-Cree and third-generation outfitter from the nearby Marten Falls First Nation. “You guys can sleep in my bed,” adds Norm Baxter, Harry’s uncle and co-guide. “I’ll take a bunk.”

The next morning, well before dawn, Harry shows me pictures of the leg-length northern pike they caught (and released) the previous night with guests from Wisconsin. Business is brisk, he says, because “the Americans love big pike and this river is full of them.”

Harry is sanguine about the prospect of the Ring of Fire development. He originally welcomed the chance to work as a labourer in the exploration camps for the winter. Norm does not hesitate when I ask his opinion about roads and mines near the camp. “They’d change this river,” he growls.

The Attawapiskat has already been altered. After several long, monotonous days of paddling, we come upon the Victor Mine, and it shocks us. Helicopters whirr overhead,

the river,” he says in quiet, broken English, idly thumbing a tattered photocopy of a hand-drawn map of his birthright trapline. “But they don’t explain why the river doesn’t freeze anymore or how much contamination is going into the water.” Tomagatick still visits his land with his family, and traps and hunts there in the winter, and is also, whisked in by De Beers’ helicopters, getting paid to trap nuisance beaver.

De Beers’s own monitoring studies have revealed a “significant” increase in mercury contamination in fish since the Victor Mine began operation. Anna Baggio, conservation director at CPAWS Wildlands League, says that the environmental assessment before the mine was built was “woefully inadequate.” De Beers ignored the risks of water contamination and the impact on wildlife populations. Most importantly, says Baggio, the company and the provincial and federal governments “never addressed the big



→ **Guardians:** Bald eagles watched over the canoe trippers on their long journey.

the breeze carries the rank smell of diesel, and a building the size of a small office tower belches warm, salty water into the Attawapiskat to keep the open pit, which extends well below the water table, from flooding.

Diamond-mining giant De Beers made its first claims on the lower Attawapiskat in the 1980s. It took the company two decades to develop this diamond mine – Ontario’s first – nestled between two tributaries of the river. This industrial intrusion mars the river’s scenic features – a series of striated limestone canyons where the water sluices over cracked-tile rocks and through a maze of box-store-sized islands that split the river into easy whitewater runs. This area inspired the river’s Cree name – *Kattawapiskak*, meaning “space between rocks.”

A few days later, we meet 62-year-old trapper John Tomagatick, a Cree from the town of Attawapiskat. Tomagatick grew up on the land where De Beers has been unearthing diamonds since 2008. “They say there’s nothing wrong with

question of who’s going to look after the Attawapiskat River.”

Neskantaga and other hardscrabble Native communities on the doorstep of the Ring of Fire may face similar token environmental assessments and ecological threats. If the mines come to fruition, Leo Moonias could become another Tomagatick, left to ponder the pain of *bimaadiziwin* lost. Baggio believes the announcement, in late 2013, by Cliffs Natural Resources to postpone development offers an opportunity to come up with a cross-cultural plan for the north. “Let’s think about infrastructure, watershed protection and species at risk,” says Baggio. “Let’s stop trying to ram this through.”

We anticipated a wilderness adventure, but were most awed by the revelations that the simple rhythm of travelling on the land provided. As the sun sets, I watch a bald eagle watching me, just as Leo predicted, as it wheels over the limestone islet on which we are camped. The De Beers earthmovers fall silent, and the Attawapiskat River flows golden in the spaces between rocks. 🦅

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