



REAL GEOGRAPHY

EXPLORING THE GEOGRAPHY OF EVERYDAY LIFE

McGraw-Hill Higher Education

“Hydro-Quebec” by Jon C. Malinowski, Ph.D.

Environmental issues are often much more complicated than they seem on the surface. This is well illustrated by the controversy surrounding the purchase of energy from Canada’s Hydro-Quebec utility.

Hydro-Quebec was formed by the Canadians as a public utility in 1944. In the 1960s the company began investigating large hydroelectric projects in northern Quebec along rivers that drain into St James Bay.

Energy use for Canada and the United States was expected to rise throughout the 1970s and 1980s, requiring an increase in power generation or dramatic conservation efforts.

In 1971, Hydro-Quebec became the chief shareholder in the James Bay Development Corporation, a company formed by the government of Canada. The plan called for flooding over 150,000 square miles to make

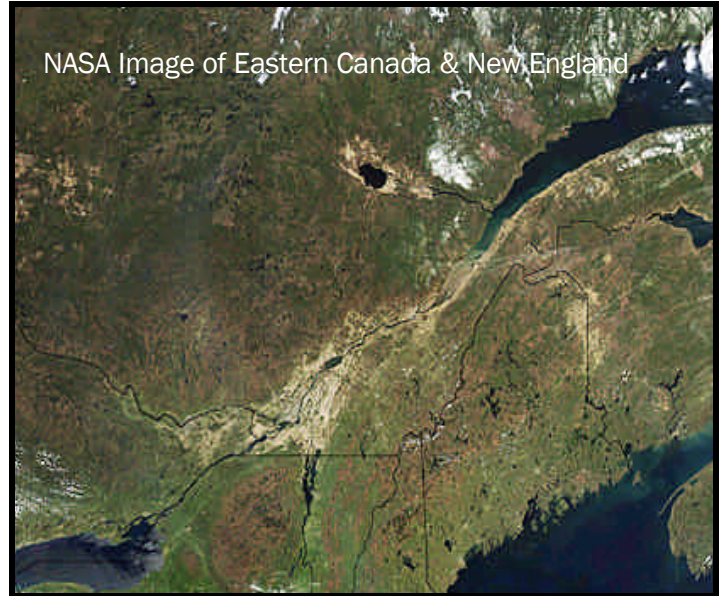
reservoirs for generating power.

Immediately the plan was controversial because about 15,000 Native Americans lived in the area to be flooded. Even if they were relocated, the area to be flooded contained valuable animal and plant resources that native groups relied upon. Some resolution was reached in 1975 with Cree Indian and Inuit groups, but great opposition remained.

Throughout the late 1970s and the 1980s, development of the hydro projects in Quebec moved at a fast pace. The project was financially successful because of contract with northeastern U.S. states. The sale of energy to the United States brought U.S. environmental groups into the debate over the project.

In the late 1980s, work began on a second phase of the project along the Great Whale River. Contracts were signed with U.S. utilities to export energy to New York and New England, as well as nearby Canadian Provinces.

Once again, native peoples in the region voiced concern. More habitat destruction was part of their concern, as was a fear that the climate of the area would be changed forever.



NASA Image of Eastern Canada & New England

Groups like the Cree Indians were particularly upset that energy produced at the expense of their environment was going to be exported to the United States.

To raise support, Cree groups made very public protests in Quebec and the United States. A canoe trip to New York Harbor garnered attention from top U.S. news agencies and magazines. Soon, U.S. environmental groups and politicians were actively campaigning against Hydro-Quebec’s projects. Lawsuits also were filed in Cana-

dian courts.

Hydro-Quebec countered criticism by pointing out the benefits of hydro-power for the environment and the positive effects that the earlier project had had in Cree and Inuit communities.

In the early 1990s, the New York Power Authority backed out of an agreement to buy power from Hydro Quebec. In 1996, the Quebec government shelved the project, but the project may be revived in the future.

Further Research

1. Where does the electric power in your area come from? How is it generated?
2. Research one of the following U.S. water projects that required people to leave their homes: 1) The Quabbin Reservoir in Massachusetts; or the 2) Ashokan Reservoir in New York state.

Links:

- Hydro Quebec and the Great Whale Project
- Hydro Quebec Homepage

http://www.t-bird.edu/pdf/about_us/case_series/a06970020.pdf

<http://www.hydroquebec.com/en/>