

Native people can't survive assault on the North

VANCOUVER — Some of the planet's priceless and irreplaceable ecosystems in exotic places like Sarawak, the Amazon and Zaire are being destroyed by human activity such as massive dams, logging and cattle ranching. But if poverty and ignorance in poor countries blind people to the consequences of their actions, what's "our" excuse?

At this moment, **Hydro-Québec** is pressing on to fulfil Premier Robert Bourassa's grand vision of harnessing for hydroelectric power all the major rivers draining into James and southern Hudson Bays from **Quebec**. The James Bay project is the largest development ever undertaken in the history of North America and is a technological "experiment" with ecological repercussions that extend far beyond the confines of **Quebec**. The affected area is as large as France and the enormous inland sea formed by the bays will be seriously impacted.

In the spring, salt ice melt in the bays and freshwater runoff into estuaries stimulate a bloom of ice algae, the basis of a food chain extending to **cod**, seals and whales. Each year, hundreds of beluga whales of the eastern herd return to the estuaries. In the fall, millions of migratory birds — ducks, geese, shorebirds — stop at biological oases on the bay edges to fatten up for flights as far as the tip of South America.

Phase I of the project, begun in 1971, has already flooded 10,000 square kilometres, and Phase II will inundate 5,000 square kilometres more. Having been exempted from environmental impact assessments on Phase I, **Hydro-Québec** wants to start the second phase before even assessing the ecological effects of the first.

In the Arctic, timing is everything. Plants and animals have evolved an impeccable synchrony with sea-



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sonal productivity in specific regions. Through narrow temporal and geographic windows, life has flourished, but unlike human beings, wild organisms can't change their feeding habits, reproduction or time of arrival. They are locked into a genetic destiny that has been honed over eons of time. Phase II will completely reverse the seasonal water cycles in the fertile estuaries — spring meltwater will be held back in reservoirs and released in winter to serve peak energy demands. What will the beluga do?

The James Bay project would never be allowed in the urban areas of the south, but to Bourassa, northern **Quebec** is a "wasteland." Yet Cree and Inuit maps are crisscrossed with family hunting and fishing territories, and seasonal routes and campsites — the entire area is occupied and developed. The JBP is not only flooding native land, it is poisoning the water. In the La Grande River reservoirs of Phase I, mercury in soil and sediment has been released as methyl mercury, then ingested and concentrated up the food chain.

Hydro-Québec's solution for the Cree to the toxic

levels in fish? Stop eating them.

Native people can survive shopping malls, junk food and television brought by the JBP, but their way of life can't. The body of knowledge painstakingly accumulated by aboriginal people over thousands of years allowed them to live rich lives in balance with the animals and plants that sustained them. But that irreplaceable lore is being erased in a single generation.

Quebecers in unprecedented numbers are asking what the JBP offers them. With alternate energy and conservation, there will be no domestic need for more energy for decades. Critics in **Quebec** say Phase I has already saddled the province with a debt of \$20 billion, while all the planned construction could add at least \$60 billion more. **Hydro-Québec** has not made public the details of the claimed lucrative contracts to export electricity to the United States.

Taxpayer-subsidized cheap energy is being used to attract aluminum smelting plants which yield relatively few jobs and pollute air and water with highly toxic effluents that put both wildlife and workers at risk. **Quebec's** main competitor for aluminum smelting is Brazil. Like a desperate Third World country, Bourassa's government is willing to destroy unique ecosystems, ignore indigenous people, increase pollution and add to massive debt for an illusion of political action and economic responsibility.

In **Quebec**, groups representing one of every six Quebecers, ranging from churches to labor unions, hunters, fishermen, environmentalists and the Parti Québécois, are demanding a moratorium on the JBP. Phase II can and must be stopped.

On Sunday at 8:00 p.m., The Nature of Things will offer a special report on James Bay. David Suzuki is a writer, TV and radio host and genealogist. He is also a spokesman on social and environmental issues.