



Wild Times

Occupied Lands

by Joe Foy

Many countries – some of which I have visited – have been occupied by outside forces for at least a period of their history.

While on a trip to Vietnam, I learned that the country had been occupied by China for a thousand years before it had regained its independence, only to be reoccupied by the French, then the Americans – before finally regaining its independence in the 1970s. During times of occupation, nations live on in the hearts and minds of their citizens. You don't have to look far to find nations that have been taken over, only to rise again – Ireland, Philippines, Malaysia, India – the list goes on and on.

You may wonder what does any of this have to do with environmental issues in BC. Well, it turns out it has a lot to do with us because our province occupies many First Nations territories. And how we treat the environment is all about how much we respect those First Nations citizens.

One statement recorded centuries ago in Vietnam goes something like: If all the trees in China were cut down to make paper it would not be enough paper to record the crimes against the Viet people during the occupation.

I wonder what history will say about our behaviour during the occupation of First Nations?

Our Prime Minister has apologized for Canada's shameful residen-

tial school system. And some first steps towards reconciliation are being made.

But great crimes against First Nations continue. Certainly the plan to flood the Peace River Valley in the face of their opposition is one such crime. I know that the government of BC does not view the Site C Dam project as a crime – but then, occupiers rarely do consider their iron-rule policies as crimes.

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But what else would you call what has been done to the First Nations of the Peace River Valley? Without their consent starting in the 1960s the BC government's WAC Bennett Dam and then in the 1980s the Peace Canyon Dam together flooded the majority of the Peace River bottomlands within their territory.

Chief Roland Willson of the West Moberly First Nation describes how caribou were once so plentiful in their territory that elders spoke of them resembling a swarm of bugs on the land. For certain months of the year West Moberly hunters would rely on moose, while in other months they would shift to caribou to take the pressure off the moose. This is how the people fed themselves. But the dams changed all that. The caribou lost access to the flooded lowlands and were

cut off from their travel routes. Today the herd is listed as endangered. The people can no longer use caribou as a food source – so moose must bear a greater hunting pressure.

Chief Willson recently travelled to the legislature in Victoria to unload 200 pounds of fish contaminated by mercury leached from the Peace dam reservoirs. The fish had carried the mercury in their bodies upstream 70 kilometres from the reservoirs – to a place that West Moberly fishers had been harvesting fish for generations. But no more. The West Moberly First Nation had taken the fish in to be tested and were shocked to learn how toxic they had become. Chief Willson's message to BC's Premier – "You take them, we can't eat them any more."

The West Moberly First Nation, along with other local First Nations have launched a series of court cases against the proposed Site C Dam.

Once again the First Nations are pitted against the occupiers in Victoria who want to flood the Peace valley bottom lands – this time it's pretty much all that's left in their country. What else could this be called but a crime?



Joe Foy is the national campaign director for the Western Canada Wilderness Committee, Canada's largest citizen-funded membership based wilderness preservation organization.