



by Joe Foy

The controversial Site C Dam on the Peace River in BC has captured more than a few headlines lately.

But the Peace River has long been at the forefront of Canada's story.

~ ~ ~

The famous explorer Alexander Mackenzie ascended the great river in 1792, and after wintering with his crew, completed his journey to the Pacific in 1793, becoming the first to cross North America, beating the American Lewis and Clark expedition by more than a decade.

He never would have succeeded without help and advice from First Nations people who guided him along his way, allowing his crew to avoid treacherous rapids and find trails that led to the coast.

Mackenzie's travels helped to ensure that the new nation of Canada would eventually become one of the world's largest countries, stretching from sea to sea to sea. Had Mackenzie not made his journey, this part of the world might have sported the stars and stripes instead of the maple leaf.

A century after Mackenzie, the Cree, Dene and other First Nations of this northern region entered into a "numbered treaty" with Canada. Treaty 8 was signed in 1899 and covers these First Nations' homelands, spanning the northern portions of BC, Alberta and Saskatchewan as well as portions of southern Northwest Territories – an area bigger than France.

The treaty laid out how the First

Nations people would be able to hunt and fish and make their living in their country as they had before – even as newcomers immigrated into the territory. According to Canada, the treaty's promise for fair sharing would last, "for as long as the sun shines, the grass grows and the rivers flow."

However, by 1968 the Peace River had ceased to flow as before, having been dammed up by the government of BC for the WAC Bennett hydroelectric project, flooding a massive area of valley bottom lands, 250 kilometres from north to south and 150 kilometres from east to west.

Moose and other animals were drowned by the hundreds as the waters rose – but that was only the beginning of the horror. The landscape that had been so drastically changed by the flooding now prevented the annual migrations of the region's caribou – and a once mighty herd starved down to endangered status. Rotting vegetation polluted the water with mercury – which concentrated in the flesh of fish that First Nations people depend on as a food source.

~ ~ ~

Over the decades, the governments of BC and Canada allowed more and more industrial damage in the Cree, Dene, and other First Nations homelands of the Treaty 8 region.

The tar sands near Fort McMurray, the gas fracking operations

around Fort Saint John, and another dam on the Peace River made it harder for First Nations people to live as they had been promised by Canada in Treaty 8.

In 2016, clearing of old growth forest along the banks of the Peace River has started for the Site C Dam. If this new dam goes ahead, basically all of the BC portion of the First Nations' Peace River Valley will be under dammed up water.

The Treaty 8 communities of West Moberly and Prophet River are fighting the Site C Dam project in court. But court is slow and bulldozers are fast.

Right now Prime Minister Trudeau could refuse BC's request for federal fisheries permits – which are required to continue the work of damming the Peace.

If there is any hope of living up to the spirit and intent of Treaty 8, which was designed to let all live in peace and dignity in the land of the Peace River – then Mr. Trudeau must refuse to issue the permits.

He needs to stop the Site C Dam now – and in doing so write a new chapter of the Canadian story – one based on fair sharing and honour.



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