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In the Boreal Forest, A Developing Storm

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POPLAR RIVER -- The elders used to say that one should not make a sound when crossing the water here, lest one awaken the thunderbird who lives just up there, up there.

Up where?

Up there, says Victor Bruce, an elder of the Poplar River First Nation. He is pointing above the trees in this boreal forest, where migrating songbirds sing, and fleeting herds of woodland caribou, silent gray ghosts of the boreal, hide.

Bruce says he believes in the thunderbird in the same way he believes that the river is alive and rocks can move, that trees cry when they are cut and the earth cannot be owned. And all the while the thunderbird watches, waiting to descend when it is disturbed, then swooping down, creating thunder and lightning in its wrath, troubling the waters. For thousands of years the Poplar River First Nation, an Ojibway Indian tribe in Manitoba, crossed this water quietly, ever so quietly, not a sound, paddles slipped into the water as if they were slicing clouds. Quietly the people moved from one shore to the next, from one plane to the other, from one generation to the next.

Quietly.

Disturbing the thunderbird meant trouble for us all.

Bruce is wondering why others don't believe -- can't believe that building a road into this forest opens the path to its destruction, that cutting down the trees to make pulp into toilet paper seems wasteful. Why companies with their bottom lines and consumers with their insatiable needs don't think of the trees as having voices and the animals living in them as having souls.

Why don't they believe in the thunderbird?

"It's our guardian, something that watches over you all the time," Bruce is saying. "It's always something that's keeping an eye on you. The old-timers, the ancestors, they used to tell us to respect all the animals and respect the birds. The thunderbird always is flying high. He's always watching everything on Earth. He's someplace in the sky."


From a muddy bank of a healing camp on an island on the tribe's traditional territory on the eastern shore of Lake Winnipeg, Bruce, 72, looks upon the water and he is quiet. The water is quiet too. Surrounding it is a

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green forest; the sky is gray. The water is clean. The place is surreal. He is in the thick of this place, considered the last frontier of the wilderness in North America. It covers half of Canada's land.

The forest, named after Boreas, the Greek god of the north wind, is threatened by encroaching development. Scientists call the boreal one of the Earth's "lungs"; the other is the Amazon rain forest. Together they "breathe out" oxygen while absorbing millions of tons of carbon dioxide, the greenhouse gas thought to contribute to global warming. The forest is coveted by those who want to cut trees, build hydropower dams, mine and develop it, seeking gas and oil.

The Poplar River First Nation, a community based about 400 miles north of Winnipeg, is trying to stop that. Not long ago, loggers came here with promises of building an all-weather road in a place that is now only accessible year-round by air. The road would open the door for others to come in. Poplar River elders said no. Developers promised them jobs. The elders said no. Developers promised them economic prosperity, a new way of life, and the elders said no. The elders had seen what happened to the community of the Pimicikamak Cree, north of Lake Winnipeg, not so far from here. So the elders in Poplar River said no. First Nation tribes have a significant voice in development projects in their traditional territories.

"The reason why we protect this land is, in other communities the forest is wiped out already. Now they have nothing," says Bruce. He is now sitting in a huge tepee at the healing camp, a retreat where there is no water running in pipes, no electricity, no artificial heat. The faint scent of burning sage, used to cleanse people of their impurities, lingers in the tent. A fire smolders in the center of the tent. Someone has discovered moose droppings near the camp site and has brought them near the fire to be examined. The perfect droppings indicate the moose on this island are healthy and there is still hope.

The Pimicikamak Cree watched a utility come and build a dam for hydroelectricity but then, they say, shorelines washed away and forest was swallowed by rising water that polluted the lakes and rivers. Now, they say, they drink polluted water.

Bruce continues, "Now they have nothing to go to. The companies wanted to give us an all-weather road. But if we have that road, the same thing will happen here."

He, like most aboriginal elders, professes: "The land, we don't own it. We look out for it. The elders have stated the creator has given us life. Without our land, our people will die. We get everything from this land. But we don't destroy it. If we let them build an all-weather road, they will destroy it. After they clear it out, what will we have? Why should we say, 'Okay, you can come around and cut pulp?' "

Pulp Reality

Susan Casey-Lefkowitz, a senior attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council, says that the boreal forest is "North America's greatest conservation opportunity."

Most of the world's original forests have been logged and developed. About 80 percent of the Canadian boreal forest is still uncut by roads. Most of its 1.3 billion acres is predominantly owned by the government and inhabited by tribes who call themselves First Nation. They live in and rely on the forests for their food, their livelihoods and their spiritual connection to the world.

Last month in Thailand, the World Conservation Congress, recognizing the international importance of the boreal forests, called upon Canada and Russia, the two countries with more than 80 percent of the world's

undeveloped forests in the Northern Hemisphere, to protect them and involve indigenous communities in any development decisions.

Then the NRDC and Greenpeace Canada announced a campaign to target Kimberly-Clark, the world's largest producer of toilet paper. The groups accuse the company of relying on fiber from ancient forests to make its toilet paper, tissue and paper towels.

"North America, home to only 7 percent of the world's population, consumes nearly half of the world's tissue paper products," Casey-Lefkowitz says.

Each year, she says, North Americans use 50 pounds of tissue paper per person, and the United States uses about 7.4 million tons of tissue paper. The group is calling upon Kimberly-Clark to include more recycled materials "so that ancient boreal forests need not be cut to be flushed down the toilet."

Kimberly-Clark spokesman Dave Dickson says the company has strict policies that emphasize economic, environmental and social sustainability in its harvesting of wood. "Our policy prohibits the use of any wood from virgin rain forests or significant old-growth forests, including Canada's boreal forest. We offer products that use recycled fiber."

He acknowledges that some of the products Kimberly-Clark produces are made from pulp that comes from boreal trees. "Yes, we use virgin pulp from the boreal forest in Canada. We do from some areas, yes, but not from ecologically significant old-growth areas." He says pulp is made of leftover sawdust and woodchip waste from the milling process and is used to make products such as Kleenex tissue.

Kimberly-Clark has about 55 percent of the facial tissue market in the United States.

Tempting Offers

Sophia Rabliauskas, a member of the Poplar River First Nation, says elders remind the community that land is more important than money.

"Like other aboriginal communities, we struggle with poverty, we struggle with unemployment, we struggle with health issues we've never seen before," she says. "Sometimes, it's tempting. They [companies] will say there is money in it, economic development. But the elders say be careful. Living in poverty, living in high unemployment, it's tempting. But we've seen the damage and destruction to the land in communities just north of here.

"Developers rarely talk about the human destruction left behind -- all kinds of diseases, illness, diabetes, children with asthma and respiratory problems."

Rabliauskas walks around the tepee, closer to the banks of the lake.

"It has happened in the past. Developers came in and destroyed land. It hasn't improved the community at all. I think we have to ask for help. We are a small group of people. Sometimes, it's overwhelming going up against major developers who have money. We will do what we can to protect the land. We will do anything."

Ernest C. Bruce, manager of the Poplar River nation and nephew of Victor Bruce, says the band is constantly being hit with proposals for development, tourism, ideas from the south to turn the land into money.

"We are afraid of the damage. One community allowed eco-tourism and the Americans came in and didn't respect the land. They hunted the moose and took the heads for trophies and left the bodies. That's against nature," Ernest Bruce says.

Other companies, he says, come in and brought with them cigarettes and alcohol and offers of jobs. "Like there was a paper mill company that came in and met with the community and promised employment in exchange for clear-cutting and promised a road. Manitoba Hydro promised employment. We've always said no to them."

Even though the community needs jobs. Only 15 percent of the 1,000 people or more in the Poplar River community work. The rest live on fixed income and social insurance.

"Some people get excited about the promise for jobs," Bruce says. "But the elders express concern. 'Are we willing to sacrifice for something short-term?' Money is only something you can hold, spend and it's gone. But the land will be here."

The Divinity of the Wild

Robert F. Kennedy Jr., a senior attorney with the NRDC, has come to this camp to help save the boreal.

"The wilderness connects us with generations," he says. "We experience the divine most forcefully when we are in the wilderness. All the Koran's prophets were shepherds who came out of the deserts. The central epiphany in the tradition of mankind has occurred in the wilderness. Mohammed wrestled the camel. Moses had to go to the wilderness to get the Commandments. Christ had to go into the wilderness to discover divinity. In every religious tradition, they all instruct us to study nature, to learn God's message."

The fire in the middle of the camp is burning. The elders are listening. The sage is simmering.

"When we destroy the last areas of wilderness, we cut ourselves off from the source of identity," says Kennedy. "When we destroy those things, it is the equivalent of tearing the last pages out of the Bible. We better hold some places in reserve to show our children."

J.P. Gladu, an aboriginal outreach coordinator for the Canadian Boreal Initiative, is on this trip, too. He is explaining that last year a coalition of energy and forest companies joined First Nation tribes and environmental groups in an agreement to preserve at least 50 percent of the boreal. The other half would be developed in an environmentally sustainable method, carefully.

"Big corporations are pretty powerful. The current model is to get bigger," Gladu says. "But economically, the world needs resources. Unless people's minds shift, it won't stop. People consume. People consume. Until we change that, I don't think it will stop."

Gladu says that for some, the union of environmentalists, First Nation and corporations is dangerous.

"It's like the story of the scorpion and the fox. The scorpion and fox need each other to get to the other side of the river," Gladu says. "The fox says, 'I'm not going to give you a ride. You will sting me.'"

"The scorpion says, 'Why would I sting you? We will both drown.'"

"The fox gives him a ride and halfway across, the scorpion stings the fox.

"The fox says, 'Why did you do that?'

"The scorpion says, 'It's in my nature.' "

Ernest C. Bruce is standing by the lake. The water is lapping. The trees are swaying. Night is coming. The hill over there, Bruce is saying, is Thunder Mountain. "They say that is where the thunderbird lives. When in the past people traveled through the land, they traveled silently. If they woke the Thunderbird, there would be thunderstorms and lightning."

Somewhere out there, a night bird cries.

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