



# Nisichawayasihk CREE NATION

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## Response to *In the Boreal Forest, A Developing Storm*

**NELSON HOUSE, Manitoba – January 11, 2005** – As Chief of the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation, I am responding to the Washington Post's article, titled *[In the Boreal Forest, A Developing Storm](#)*, to provide readers with another perspective on the realities faced by First Nations people living in the boreal forest of northern Manitoba.

To support an argument to preserve the boreal forest, the writer painted a romantic, surreal and narrow picture of the life of northern Aboriginal people. She apparently spoke only to those who are closed to the idea that positive development can take place within the boreal forest and gave no weight to the needs and aspirations of the majority of First Nations people who live in the north and have been the guardians of this great forest for over 7,000 years.

The article references the Natural Resources Defense Council, that among other things is bent on a mission to stop any development in Manitoba's boreal forest, including, but not mentioned in the article, a modest hydroelectric dam, to be built in our traditional use lands, that is critical to our future.

NRDC lawyer Robert F. Kennedy Jr. is quoted comparing his mission to save the boreal forest to a religious experience. Kennedy says he wants to save the boreal forest so there will be something left to show his children. But what about our children? We also have a vision for their future and wonder why the lobby he represents would choose to work against, rather than with, the people who live here to help us to continue to use and protect the forest in a sustainable way.

My own First Nation has a rapidly growing population of close to 5,000, with most Members living in Nelson House, about 500 miles north of Winnipeg and 2,000-miles northwest of Washington D.C. Over 60 percent of our people are young, between 13 and 30 years of age, and for most of us everyday life is a struggle. Try to imagine living in a two-bedroom house with 11 people: elders, young adults and children.

We live in the 21st century and have the same expectations and aspirations as anyone else. We don't live in teepees as a curiosity for eco-tourists. We need 400 homes today, but we also desperately need opportunities for our youth. High unemployment, poverty and despair are common social themes for people living in remote northern communities. Population growth has outstripped the ability to be supported by traditional harvesting and gathering activities. Yet our

community has hope, because for the past five years we have been working to develop a workable economy here in the boreal forest.

We cannot sustain our First Nation on handouts. History has proven well-intentioned actions by governments, environmental organizations, churches and others who want to do for us what we must and want to do for ourselves, have not been helpful. What progress we have made, we have made for ourselves.

We are currently negotiating with Manitoba Hydro to become an equity partner in the proposed 200-megawatt Wuskwatim power station, mentioned above, to be built on the Burntwood River within our traditional land. This dam is economically and environmentally sound with significant benefits for Aboriginal People. It would flood less than one-fifth of a square mile. Our First Nation turned aside the idea of a much larger dam because we exercise responsibility for our lands.

We believe such carefully managed, environmentally sensitive development can bring remote northern Manitoba First Nations access to basic goods, services and socioeconomic opportunities most North Americans take for granted. Such developments are also an essential part of sustaining not just the people who live here, but the boreal forest as well. As long as we are able to sustain our people and way of life we know we will be able to sustain our natural treasures, including the boreal forest. This is not just a long-term plan. It is a journey. The transition from paternalism (still being expressed by Mr. Kennedy and NRDC) to community self-sufficiency is not an easy one, but we are blazing a new path and have made great strides.

Rather than block such sustainable economic efforts, we invite the NRDC and others to walk with us and support us as we work to realize our vision to exercise our independence while achieving both a prosperous socioeconomic future for our People and a healthy and sustainable boreal environment. The idea our youth should accept a subsistence way of life supported by handouts and encouraged by romantic notions is not realistic or helpful.

Chief Jerry Primrose  
Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation