



Overlooking Wasakamew (Troy) Lake, one of many beautiful Split Lake area views.

Chapter 9

Concluding Summary

ONLY A PORTION of the long and vibrant story of the Split Lake Cree is presented in this study. It concentrates on the 20TH century, and attempts to identify and analyze the developments which have changed forever the First Nation's environment and ancient way of life. Undoubtedly, the most profound of these has been the impact of hydroelectric projects on the lands and waters, as well as on Split Lake Cree cultural, social, and spiritual traditions.

This report has been completed as one of several studies in the joint study program of Split Lake Cree and Manitoba Hydro that has been underway since 1992. It is also part of Phase One of a joint Post Project Environmental Review of hydroelectric project impacts which Split Lake Cree and Manitoba Hydro are conducting. It should be read in conjunction with the other Phase One reports dealing with the history, extent and impacts of hydro development in the Split Lake resource area and with environmental impacts of such development on the Split Lake Cree.

The ancestors of the Split Lake Cree have lived in what is now northern Manitoba for generations. Here they hunted, trapped, and fished, relying on the often abundant wealth that Mother Nature provided to sustain them and to give meaning to their lives. Although the world was changing, their forefathers adapted within the context of their own culture and, well into the first half of the 20TH century, continued to find their livelihood and their identity from the lands and waters in their vast resource area. A proud, self-reliant people, they still had little contact with the outside world and continued to rely on their own strength and social cohesion.

However, by the 1920s, the outside world was beginning to intrude into the lives of the Split Lake Cree, challenging their traditional ways and values. This trend continued with increasing persistence, such that by the 1950s the changes it brought could no longer be ignored. The registered trapline system, residential schools, the Hudson Bay railway, family allowance – all of these had an impact on the way people lived. They affected the Cree culture in various and complex ways, all of which reduced the traditional reliance on and use of the lands and waters. People no longer harvested resources as extensively as they had in the past, some of the younger generation did not have the opportunity to learn the traditional skills, and more and more people began to live in one central location year-round at Split Lake. Social impacts did not occur immediately, but the stage was being set for future problems.

Split Lake Elders say that by the 1960s people were adapting. They were getting used to the new realities and beginning to accept the modernization that could not be avoided. However, just as the community was getting used to these changes, the first signs appeared of what was to be the most devastating change of all. With the operation of the Kelsey dam and generating station, Split Lake Cree got a first taste of what was to them the totally inconceivable – dramatic changes to the nature of their lands and waters such as had never before been known. While they were just starting to take in the magnitude of what was happening to their sacred land, they also had to begin dealing with the social consequences of other outside influences. The development of Thompson as a regional centre, the coming of electricity, television, modern appliances, and perhaps more significantly, the completion of an all-weather road to Thompson – all of these had destabilizing effects on the community.

These changes were compounded by the drastic manipulation of the waterways that occurred in the 1970s with the Lake Winnipeg Regulation – Churchill River Diversion project, and the related construction of major generating stations. The effects of Kelsey were tame by comparison. The lands and waters that Split Lake Cree had relied on since time immemorial, that formed the very centre of their identity as Cree people, were uncompromisingly altered by an outside force over which they had no control. People became disoriented as they tried to grasp what was happening to them and come to terms with an uncertain future.

Joining together with other impacted First Nations in the Northern Flood Committee, Split Lake Cree found themselves frustrated in their efforts to have the 1977 Northern Flood Agreement implemented. Just as they had trusted the Crown when they signed their treaty at the beginning of the century, so they had believed the promises that, through the Northern Flood Agreement, they would at least be compensated for the devastation they had suffered. Yet, as the 1970s and 1980s wore on, they seemed to be getting nowhere and the community, weakened by the loss of its traditional ways, faced ever deepening social problems.



The Kelsey generating station on the Nelson River at Split Lake was the first of four generating stations in the Split Lake resource area.

Finally, as the 1980s progressed, the First Nation managed to reassert control of its destiny. Its decision to conclude the global Northern Flood Agreement negotiations, by itself if necessary, signalled the beginning of a new era. In June 1992, Split Lake Cree First Nation finally concluded the NFA Implementation Agreement with Canada, Manitoba, and Manitoba Hydro to compensate for the losses it had suffered. The arrangements entered into with the other three parties under the terms of the agreement will lead to both the physical renewal of the community at Split Lake and shared control by the First Nation of development throughout its resource area.

The proud Split Lake Cree have re-established the foundation for their development, combining the best of their traditional ways and values with the benefits of the modern world.

Numerous influences have affected and changed the lives of the Split Lake Cree in the 20TH century. While hydroelectric development has had the most dramatic impact, it must be seen in relation to other forces which have also changed forever the old way of life. Other agents of change, like residential school and family allowance, had major but transitory and manageable effects. Features of modernization like formal education, electric appliances, and water and sewer systems became easily blended with traditional values. However, hydroelectric impacts, some of which were permanent, were profound and directly contrary to those values.

This study has documented some of the key changes that have occurred in Split Lake Cree resource harvesting activities, particularly as they have been impacted by the hydroelectric projects. Many of the other effects of hydroelectric development are unseen and impossible to measure. They can be direct or indirect but are, nonetheless, just as real. The damages to Split Lake Cree cultural, social, and spiritual identity have been the most disturbing, touching the very core of their being. It will be the task of Phase Three of the Manitoba Hydro-Split Lake joint Post Project Environmental Review to establish an environmental baseline from which to measure future potential hydroelectric impacts.