

Feeling the Impacts of Paper:

Indigenous to Canada, Ontario's Grassy Narrows First Nation Stands Up in Defense of Their Land



Losing Their Traditional Lands

Although the people of the Grassy Narrows First Nation face many challenges, their biggest is keeping their traditional lands from being further cut by Abitibi – with fiber used by both Abitibi and Weyerhaeuser to make paper. Members and descendants of the Grassy Narrows First Nation have occupied a traditional land base of approximately 2,500 square miles for thousands of years.

The Grassy Narrows First Nation has occupied a traditional land base for millenia.

This land supports a subsistence way of life for the nearly 50% of tribal members that are dependent upon hunting, trapping, and gathering berries and medicines. A majority of this land base is known as the Whiskey Jack and Trout Lake Forests and any rights to it claimed by Grassy Narrows are not recognized by the Ontario government – who has granted tenures to Abitibi to “manage” the land.

“Over 50 percent of our traditional land has been clear-cut. There's reforestation but it's all monoculture tree farming. They plant trees they're going to harvest again. The land is turning into a tree farm,” says Joe Fobister, spokesperson for the Grassy Narrows First Nation Environmental Committee. In addition, to the single-species replanting, it is also chemically managed in two- to three-



Photo credit, above and top: Friends of Grassy Narrows

Background

The people of Asubpeeschoseewagong (Grassy Narrows First Nation), live on a small reserve 80 kilometers north of Kenora, in Northern Ontario. Like most indigenous peoples, it has been and is a struggle to survive. In the early 1960s, they were uprooted by Indian Affairs. In the 1970s, the government informed them that several tons of inorganic mercury from a pulp and paper mill upstream in Dryden had contaminated their water and fish—seriously affecting the health, well being, and livelihood of the community. As a result, members of the Grassy Narrows Band are also burdened with high unemployment, and the associated social challenges.

year spraying cycles to suppress competing species and to optimize growth. This chemical management is reducing the amount of harvestable berries and plant-based medicines in addition to contributing to a weakened state of health of deer and other wildlife.

Under Condition 34, Abitibi is required to consult with indigenous groups and to incorporate “native values” into their forest management. Members of Grassy Narrows have met repeatedly with Abitibi, but their requests for more conservation and better forest management have not been met. Additionally, the integration of “native values” has not occurred in a meaningful way. The fact that the forest is cut within one hundred feet of traditional trap lines is an example of the less than adequate implementation of management which respects “native values.”

A Right to Determine Their Future?

In a March 27, 2006 briefing to the United Nations, Amnesty International purported that the current resource extraction in Grassy Narrows is a violation of Treaty Rights and

International Laws that provide for the protection of indigenous peoples' right to self-determination. The briefing explains that Grassy Narrows falls within the territory covered by the 1873 treaty between the Canadian state and the Chiefs of the Salteaux Tribe of the Ojibway Indians. This treaty, known as Treaty 3, establishes that indigenous peoples have the “right to pursue their avocations of hunting and fishing throughout the tract.” Despite this treaty right, the people of Grassy Narrows have lost access to an increasing part of their traditional resources as a consequence of developments permitted by the provincial government without the consent of the community.

The Fate of the Forest

Abitibi's new plan, dubbed the “Whiskey Jack Management Plan,” would secure the corporation's right to harvest the forest in five year increments from April 2004 until 2024. Much of the Whiskey Jack Forest is in a young, fragmented state, having been recently disturbed by large amounts of fire, wind damage, road building, and logging. “The forest is in rough shape,” says Chris Henschel, Manager of Forest Certification at Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society [CPAWS] Wildlands League. “Abitibi cut almost all of the woodland caribou habitat in the forest between 1999-2004 that was

still there after earlier logging periods. I don't know if the caribou – which is a threatened species – will survive here.” A recent report on the Whiskey Jack Forest completed by CPAWS found that:

- The current harvesting level cannot be sustained for even 20 years.
- The company's estimate of available wood is based on unrealistic assumptions about how much the forest can produce each year.
- Harvest levels are too high to protect existing wildlife habitat, or to allow the restoration of degraded habitat conditions in the forest.

The Ontario government and Abitibi should be focusing on restoring the forest, rather than trying to sustain the cut,” says Henschel. The company recently received approval earlier this year for a new five-year forest management plan.



Photo credit: Wayne Sawchuck

Trout Lake: A Chance to Do It Right in the Northern Boreal

Northeast of the Whiskey Jack Forest unit, and partially Grassy Narrows Traditional Territory, is the Trout Lake Forest unit. Trappers from Grassy Narrows trap lines run into the Trout Lake Forest and, in areas that have been spared from clear-cutting, are still productive. The forest management unit covers an expanse of over one million hectares and is at the northern most edge of Ontario's Boreal forest lands that have been licensed for logging.

The Trout Lake Forest is managed by Weyerhaeuser Company Limited. The northern portion of the Trout Lake Forest is mainly intact and much of the area is critical caribou habitat. Fiber from this area feeds several Weyerhaeuser mills including Dryden, Ear Falls, Trust Joist and others that make products such as printing and writing papers and engineered wood products.

Weyerhaeuser's five year logging plans, which are opposed by Grassy Narrows, include breaking new roads into and clear-cutting key areas in this intact area and in critical caribou habitat. This will significantly impact local woodland caribou populations just as it has in the Whiskey Jack Forest and across Grassy Narrows Traditional territory.

In fact, in the last 110 years, the historic range of woodland caribou has been reduced by half in Ontario. The steady erosion of intact older forest and extensive clear cutting have decimated caribou populations in Ontario. Caribou's southern limit has been moving northward at 34 km per decade coinciding with the northern front of industrial logging. Outside some relatively small intact areas such as are found in Trout Lake, healthy woodland caribou populations are almost entirely restricted to areas of undeveloped boreal forest found north of the licensed cut line. It is critical that aboriginal peoples rights are honored and respected and that these few remaining areas are not lost.

Taking Matters Into Their Own Hands

After more than a decade of letter-writing, meetings, protests, petitions and legal efforts, young people from the community have taken matters into their own hands

and are coordinating an ongoing community blockade that has successfully halted logging in the area for over three years and has drawn international attention.



“Over 50% of our land has been clear-cut.”
– Joe Fobister

“The land is us. Instead of the land belonging to us, we belong to the land. Protecting the land is like protecting ourselves and future generations,” explains a blockader.

The Grassy Narrows blockaders ask that people “make an informed decision on the paper products that they use, and if it comes from Weyerhaeuser or Abitibi for them to know that it destroying our people, our way of life.”

What the Market Can Do

Companies purchasing products from Abitibi or Weyerhaeuser are encouraged to formally communicate to both companies that as a customer you would like to see:

- A moratorium on logging, road-building, and chemical spraying in Grassy Narrows traditional territory pending community consent.
- Logging with the free, prior, and informed consent of the Grassy Narrows and indigenous communities on indigenous lands or disputed territories.
- Deferrals for Endangered Forests (as defined by the Wye River group), preferred Woodland Caribou habitat, and areas of cultural value, pending legislated protection.
- Increases in the post-consumer recycled content of paper products across all product lines to a minimum of 30% and the use of non-tree fiber sources where possible.
- FSC certification for all fiber sources and chains of custody.

As a customer, your concerns and wishes have value and can motivate the supply chain to move in a direction which balances social responsibility and community rights with corporate growth and current operating principles.

For more information, visit

www.freegrassy.org

This profile was developed by a range of organizations working on paper and related issues.