



FEM  
NORTH  
NET

RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT IN NORTHERN COMMUNITIES; LOCAL WOMEN MATTER

Fact Sheet #2

## LOCAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE LAND AND WATER

### Introduction

The relationship to the land is strong in Canada's northern communities; in part this reflects the vast wilderness in which people live. Labrador is called The Big Land for a reason.

People and communities in Canada's north get their identity and sense of self from a long and ongoing connection to land, animals, plants and medicines that provide life. This sense of who they are is also linked to living on that land.

In this fact sheet, we discuss values and beliefs held by many Indigenous societies about relationships with the land and water. We contrast this with a more recent, Eurocentric, corporate perspective that puts profits first. We consider the implications of both perspectives for resource development. We then highlight what brought a diverse group of local women together to influence the impacts of resource development in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, Labrador.

### Indigenous Perspectives on the Land and Water

Indigenous people in Canada, the first local inhabitants, have deep ties to their territories that stretch back thousands of years. Having lived on the land for generations, long before anyone could buy goods at a store, Indigenous people enjoy a deep relationship with, respect for, and knowledge about the land and water that sustains life.

**Distinct local, Indigenous identities and cultures are deeply tied to the knowledge, beliefs and traditions related to the land and water their people used for generations.**

This is one in a series of ten fact sheets on women and resource development and extraction. All of the fact sheets are available at [www.fnn.criaw-icref.ca](http://www.fnn.criaw-icref.ca) and include additional resources on these topics.

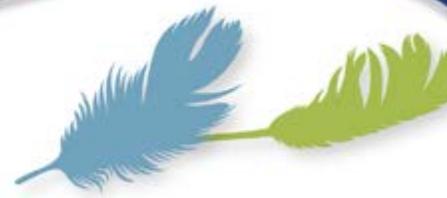
CRIAW-ICREF acknowledges its presence and work on Indigenous Territories. We respectfully recognize the legacy of colonization upon Indigenous Peoples.

This publication was created by CRIAW's Feminist Northern Network. For the full list of contributors refer to our website.

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*The Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women – FemNorthNet*  
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“The powerful Muskrat Falls” by Susan Manning (2014)

At the risk of oversimplifying, we offer some of the values and beliefs about the land, sometimes called Mother Earth, that are embedded in many Indigenous cultures.

- All forms of life have a spirit and a purpose.
- The land and its elements are inter-connected with people who live there
- To live in the right way requires people to have a sense of respect for and relationship with the natural world
- No one owns the land
- Those who are alive now are guardians and keepers of the land for future generations.

### Everything is linked

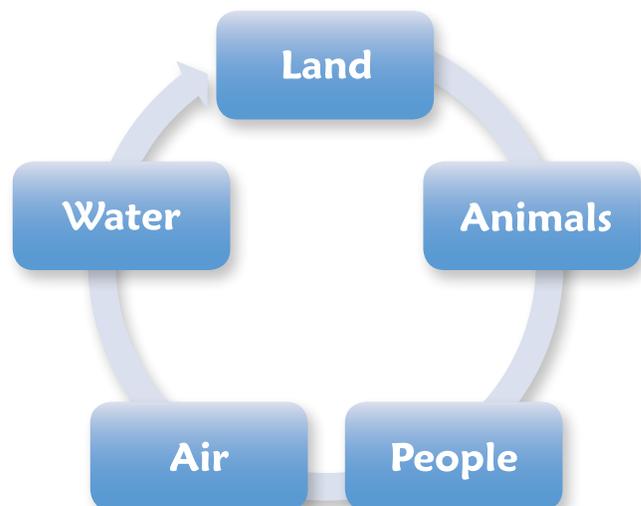
The drawing below shows how all the elements of life are connected and have life. In the circle, an impact on one element, like water, will affect everything else as well—the land, animals, air

and people—because everything is linked. This worldview means that when people decide to do something that will have an impact on one element, they must also take into account other elements in this circle of life. This way of thinking is particularly relevant when it comes to decisions about resource extraction.

In [a public letter](#) (below), Innu Elder Tshakuesh Elizabeth Penashue talks about the inter-connected impacts of a decision by the province of Newfoundland and Labrador’s Crown Corporation, Nalcor Energy, to build a large hydro dam on traditional Innu land and the river known to the Innu as Mista-shipu. The dam is at Muskrat Falls, on what is also known as the Lower Churchill River, near the Innu community of Sheshatshiu and close to the town of Happy Valley-Goose Bay, Labrador.

*I cannot speak of all my concerns, but I can tell you there are many nights I cry, thinking of our Elders and the thousands of years we Innu used the land to provide for families, and taught our children about our culture, and to watch it all be destroyed.*

### Indigenous Perspective



Credit: A. Manuel

*I feel obligated to speak for the Innu about our concerns since, for many years, we canoed the river with intentions to protect our future.*

*We as Elders will not be here forever, but we still do our best to protect what is left for our future generations. They too will protect our culture.*

*I honestly feel that all the issues that are happening during construction are because a greater spirit, Mother Earth, is trying to tell you that this is wrong. But the company is not listening.*

*The spirit is telling you not to destroy the land and habitat of the animals. Our Mother Earth is telling us this.*

*—Tshakuesh Elizabeth Penashue,  
Innu Elder of Sheshatshiu*

**Tshakuesh Elizabeth Penashue was arrested five times for defending her land and culture. In 1989, she spent two months in jail for protesting NATO's low-level missile training program flying over Innu land.**

**Elizabeth does long wilderness walks, called *meshkanu* in her language, to remain connected to the land, to teach her children and grandchildren, and to raise general awareness of this vital relationship. Learn more about her walks by watching a 20-minute film called *Meshkanu*, available online at <https://vimeo.com/57346500>.**

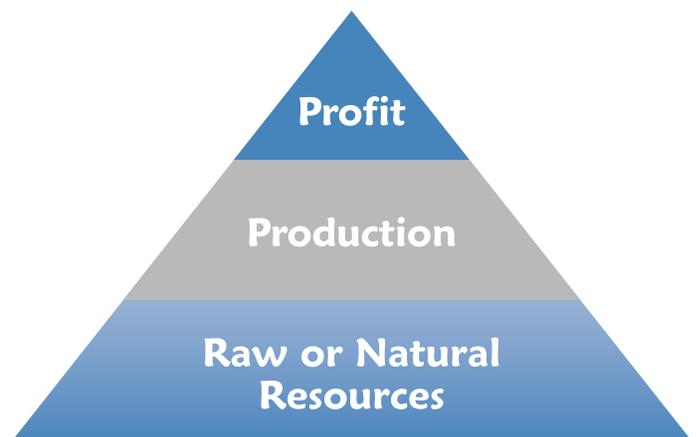
## **Eurocentric or Corporate Perspectives on Resources**

In Labrador and northern Manitoba, a Eurocentric or corporate perspective took hold in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s.

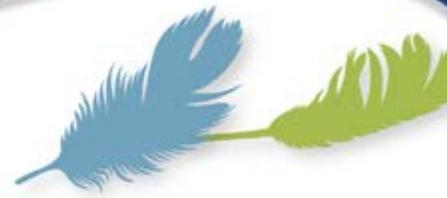
Before that, many early settlers shared practices and values with local Indigenous people. Everyone relied on the natural environment and its elements to survive. They knew where to fish and find food, in all the seasons. Women knew how to use the skins of animals to make clothing and other items for daily life. This experience shaped settlers' strong connection to the land and helped Indigenous people and settlers live together.

A different set of values we call Eurocentric or corporate drove the "opening up" of Canada's north for resource extraction. Profit is at the top of this pyramid because this set of values accepts profit as being more important than the impact on resources, including preserving resources for future generations.

### **Eurocentric or Corporate Perspective**



Adapted from A. Manuel



“Model of hydroelectric dam at Muskrat Falls” from Nalcor Energy (2010)

**At Muskrat Falls, as with other cases of northern resource extraction, the decision to create a mega-dam at a powerful spot in a river reflects a perspective we can call Eurocentric, settler or corporate. This value system sees the land as a resource to be exploited and used to produce a profit.**

With the hydro-electric dam at Muskrat Falls, Nalcor Energy aims to profit by selling energy outside the province. The provincial government hopes to use profits from this new power source to expand into other resource extraction projects in Labrador, such as iron ore from the Labrador Trough, uranium and other minerals.

### **Claiming Our Place: Women’s Relationship with Rivers**

A focus on women’s relationship with the natural environment brought a diverse group of local women together in 2012. The goal was to try to influence the

impacts of resource development in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, Labrador. This town of 8,000 has Innu, Inuit, Nunatukavummiut (formerly known as the Labrador Métis), settlers whose ancestors arrived hundreds of years ago, and more recent arrivals, such as temporary foreign workers.

The community was facing major changes: a massive hydro-electric dam was to be built at nearby Muskrat Falls on the *Mista-shipu* (to the Innu)/Grand (to the Inuit)/Lower Churchill River (to settlers). The addition of 5,000 workers, mostly male, for five years was expected to change the small community.

Organizers invited women from different cultural communities to gather to talk about their relationship with rivers as a way to start the discussion of the impacts of this major resource development on local women, their families and their way of life. During their time together:

- Women explored the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual connections they have with the natural environment
- They identified many common experiences and perspectives
- Most women said they spend a lot of time outside, depend on natural food sources (wild food), know where to hunt and fish for game, and can use animal skins to make clothing and other items for daily use.

Talking about women’s relationship with rivers helped to:

- Bring together a diverse group of local women, across racial groups for the first time in years, if not ever, in the community of Happy Valley-Goose Bay
- Develop a common concern—preserving the river and traditional ways of life it supports
- Identify a common story about the impacts of damming the Lower Churchill River and common values, despite different beliefs and perspectives about well-being of the river



- Focus on the ways people and land and water relate to each other, based on Indigenous perspectives and beliefs
- Establish a set of values that differ from Eurocentric values of individual and corporate wealth from resource development.

Some accomplishments of the group are described in *Fact Sheet 7, Northern Community Models that Value Women*. You can also learn more about what happened at [www.femnorthnet.ca](http://www.femnorthnet.ca).



“Participants in the Happy Valley – Goose Bay Creative Action Circles™ developed a shadow puppet show to express their feelings and concerns about the hydroelectric development at Muskrat Falls.” Photo by Jane Stinson (2013)

## RESOURCES

Manuel, Arthur (April 2013). Presentation on Aboriginal Rights and Economic Uncertainty. Keynote address at Mining Watch *Canada’s conference Canada’s Development Model: Beyond Extraction*. Retrieved from [http://www.miningwatch.ca/sites/www.miningwatch.ca/files/downloads/Art\\_Manuel\\_keynote-64k.mp3](http://www.miningwatch.ca/sites/www.miningwatch.ca/files/downloads/Art_Manuel_keynote-64k.mp3)

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Gail Baikie, Libby Dean and Petrina Beals. Women’s Experience of Dislocation from the Rivers and Land: Results from the Claiming our Place: Women’s Relationship with Rivers project in Labrador. Poster. December 2013. <http://fnn.criaw-icref.ca/images/userfiles/files/WomensExperiencesofDislocationPoster.pdf>

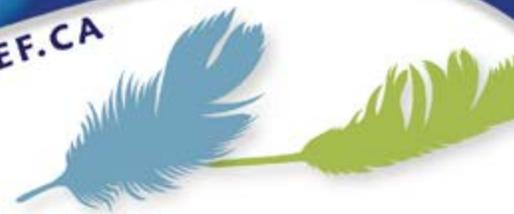
FemNorthNet Fact Sheet. *Claiming Our Place: Local Women Matter in Resource Development*. Retrieved from <http://fnn.criaw-icref.ca/images/userfiles/files/ClaimingOurPlace.pdf>

## ABOUT FEMNORTHNET

Economic development centered around resource extraction is changing northern communities in Canada socially, economically, and culturally. FemNorthNet (or the Feminist Northern Network) documented and shared the experiences of diverse, northern women affected by these changes while supporting them in their work to strengthen and build resiliency within their communities. FemNorthNet was initiated by the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAW) and supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. This network engaged over 30 researchers and community activists across Canadian universities, colleges, and northern community organizations, with community partners in Thompson (Manitoba), Happy Valley – Goose Bay (Labrador), and Labrador West (Labrador). Learn more at [www.fnn.criaw-icref.ca](http://www.fnn.criaw-icref.ca).

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## Support the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women

Since 1976, the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAW) has been documenting the economic and social situation of women in Canada through ground-breaking feminist research. All CRIAW activities flow from an overarching goal to provide tools to help organizations taking action to advance social justice and equality for all women.

As a non-profit organization and charity, CRIAW's activities depend on the support of its members and donors from across Canada. All CRIAW members receive the CRIAW eNewsletter directly in their inbox, along with notices of new reports, policy papers, and fact sheets – like this one.

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