

# First Nations Women and Sustainability on the Canadian Prairies

BRENDA MCLEOD

*Le développement durable chez les Premières Nations des provinces des prairies canadiennes sera compris à travers les traités de coexistence pacifique et l'occupation partagée des territoires. Des circonstances uniques ont permis aux femmes des Premières Nations de mieux comprendre l'impact de la colonisation sur le développement durable à un niveau personnel, communautaire et national.*

In pre-colonial times, First Nations<sup>1</sup> across Canada engaged in agriculture, hunting, trapping, fishing, and gathering to survive and trade for goods with other Aboriginal nations in the Americas (Dickason). First Nations engaged in these activities primarily as hunting and gathering societies but also within larger complex social settings along the West Coast and Eastern Woodlands areas of Canada where it was possible to grow or access a localized food supply. Activities were primarily carried out at a subsistence level that promoted sufficiency over accumulation, based on their spiritual and material attachment to their homeland (Chamberlin). The colonization of Canada changed the way that land and resources were used and interfered with First Nations' ways of life.

First Nations across Canada share a common experience of colonial encounter that has left them economically marginalized, politically weakened, and culturally stigmatized. The effects of the colonial experience include a loss of land base and access to resources that allowed First Nations to engage in a sustainable livelihood in pre-colonial times. Furthermore, the loss of sustainable livelihood has been accompanied by environmental degradation of the remaining homelands where significant numbers of First Nations people still reside. The overall effect for First Nation communities has been the endemic presence of social, mental and physical illness in communities that were once self-sustaining and environmentally sustaining. The key to changing the present conditions in First Nation communities lies in sustainable development that meets the needs of the communities as defined by them and respects their value systems while providing sustainability.

Women in First Nation communities share concerns with other women for social change that will return sustainability to their communities. Although still important, the concerns of most First Nations women, unlike many Canadian feminists, are not embedded pri-

marily in gender issues; due to the subjugation of First Nations peoples in Canada, the issues of First Nations women are most often grounded in national and com-

---

**The loss of sustainable livelihood has been accompanied by environmental degradation of the remaining homelands where significant numbers of First Nations people still reside.**

---

munity issues. Inherent in these issues is the legacy of colonialism that has displaced First Nations from traditional lands and resources, accompanied by the subjugation of traditional economies and customs that have culminated in an overall loss of a way of life for men and women alike. The social, political, and economic disadvantage that First Nations women experience in their communities can be attributed to gender bias that originated with missionaries who introduced male domination and hierarchy into an egalitarian social system. First Nations women experience racism and discrimination within the larger society as Aboriginal persons and as women but also discrimination within their own communities, because they are women. These conditions translate into less access to jobs, support, training programs, and a reduced ability to affect and change their circumstances, as well as lower life expectancy than non-Aboriginal women.

The physical loss of lands and resources for First Nations, accompanied by repressive government policies, have separated First Nations from their lands and resources, either through harvesting resources with little or no return to First Nation communities or by restricting access and economic development for the benefit of those same communities. Economic development for individuals and communities outside of First Nation communities have provided few employment opportunities for Aboriginals and resulted in environmental degradation—reducing sustainability in terms of livelihood and health. Such negative impacts lead to despair and a sense of degradation and dehumanization as people are forced to depend on state programs to survive.

This paper explores historical events experienced by

First Nation communities in Saskatchewan focusing on the objectives of treaty-making between First Nations and the Crown with reference to sustainability. Treaty promises of access to lands and resources to sustain First Nations' livelihood will be measured against the actual conditions for sustainable development that resulted from these treaties—particularly considering the promise and the pitfalls of contemporary treaty land entitlement agreements.

The paper will conclude by pointing to the need for exploring sustainability from the perspectives of First Nations, particularly women, in order to provide a basis for social, mental and physical well-being.

---

**“It was decided long before the White man arrived that the First Nations would treat the newcomers as brothers and sisters ... that they should live in peace and share the land.”**

---

#### **The Treaty Relationship Between Saskatchewan First Nations and the Crown**

During the first 200 years after Europeans first came to North America, First Nations built relationships with newcomers through the fur trade. Later, the Crown required access to lands held by First Nations, to facilitate its colonization agenda of settlement and agriculture through immigration. Elders in the five treaty areas of Saskatchewan recall the settlement of Europeans in their lands being foretold through the prophecies of their ancestors (Cardinal and Hildebrandt). This knowledge assisted First Nations in preparing to accommodate newcomers in their traditional lands. As a result,

[i]t was decided long before the White man arrived that the First Nations would treat the newcomers as relatives, as brothers and sisters ... that they should live in peace and that they would share the land. The sacred earth could never be sold or given away, according to the principles of First Nations, but it could be shared ... to the depth of a plough blade ... so everyone could peacefully co-exist. (Elder Peter Waskahat qtd. in Cardinal and Hildebrandt 31)

The treaty process was chosen to facilitate this sharing as it was familiar to both First Nations and Europeans. Beginning in 1870, a number of treaties were made that covered the area of what would later become the three Prairie provinces. Essentially, for First Nations, the various treaties were agreements to ensure peaceful relations between the Crown and First Nations and arrange a sharing of territory (Cardinal and Hildebrandt).

First Nations sought to secure a Crown guarantee that their relationship with the Creator would be treated with respect and integrity (Cardinal and Hildebrandt). A number of principles were affirmed in the treaties signed between the Crown and First Nations. These principles include a joint acknowledgement of the supremacy of the Creator; a joint commitment to the maintenance of peace; a mutual agreement to create a perpetual familial relationship; a guarantee of each other's survival and stability based on mutual sharing; and finally, that the sharing arrangement guarantee a continuing right of livelihood to First Nations (Cardinal and Hildebrandt). Thus, First Nations looked to treaties as an economic future but also a wider base of sustainability where their values towards the use of land and resources would ensure long-term survival as well as a livelihood.

Conversely, for the Crown, the main objective in making treaties with First Nations was to secure clear title to particular geographic areas and resources for settlement (Tough). Settlers required lands for agriculture but timber and hay resources were valuable to settlers and government alike. Settlers counted on timber, hay and grazing to subsidize and enhance ranching and agriculture operations while government coffers expanded through revenues generated from leases and permits for the use of these resources (Lambrecht).

The Crown's objective depended upon the alienation of vast tracts of land and resources from First Nations in Saskatchewan and Manitoba. In exchange for the taking of lands and resources, the Crown provided “gifts” of cash, hunting and trapping supplies, agricultural supplies, cloth, and Reserve<sup>2</sup> lands for the exclusive use of Indian peoples. In the treaties covering Saskatchewan and Manitoba, the Crown promised to pay annuities and provide for the needs of First Nations in the context of a fiduciary relationship.

The nature of this relationship between sovereign nations was based on the Crown's duty of care to act in the best interests of First Nations, which I argue requires a commitment to the sustainability of First Nations. The Crown and First Nations sealed treaties in spiritual and state ceremonies with each party committing to enduring obligations and responsibilities. Treaty commissioners carried out the negotiations on behalf of the Crown but treaty implementation was the responsibility of government officials. The “official representatives” in the treaty negotiations were male Band members who were 21 years and older.

First Nations women were certainly present at the time of treaty negotiations but were not permitted a vote or voice in the negotiations with Commissioners. Under the *Indian Act*, First Nations women were not recognized legally as persons; a woman's status as an Indian and her Band membership was determined by her father or her husband, who were assigned her political and social powers (Voyageur).

## Treaty Implementation

Treaties continued to be negotiated until the early 1900s but were never ratified by parliamentary process in Canada. By 1876, the Dominion government consolidated all previous legislation about Indian peoples into *The Indian Act*. Within four years, the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA) was created to administer the new Act and implement the terms of the treaty negotiated with the registered Indian population in Canada. Interpretation of the terms of the treaties was left to government officials who tended to provide a very literal interpretation to the terms; missing from the literal text of the treaties was the spirit and intent under which those treaties were negotiated. However, that context is retained through the oral histories of First Nations and still exists today with Elders. Considerable differences exist between literal interpretation of the promises made in treaties and what First Nations believed they had agreed to. DIA officials were influenced in their interpretations by the bureaucratic machinery of not only their own department, but also the larger Department of the Interior, of which the DIA was a part.

The Department of the Interior was structured so that one Deputy Minister was responsible for all of the settlement/homestead lands and all of the resources under the *Dominion Lands Act*. The DIA had its own Deputy Superintendent General whose responsibilities included all of the lands reserved for Indians and their accompanying resources. Both of these Deputy Ministers reported directly to the Minister of the Interior, while ideally managing two distinct land classifications independently. This ideal quickly broke down when Treaty First Nations began to make Reserve selections in areas that were coveted by settlers and colonization companies or were desired for commercial purposes. Competing government policies of the DIA, *Dominion Lands Act* and private interests led to land surrenders of entire Reserves or major portions of Reserve lands and sometimes relocation to land that was insufficient in quantity and quality to engage in a sustainable livelihood of agriculture or subsistence activities (Carter). These events served to create unsustainable conditions for First Nations, thus failing to meet the duty of care promised at treaty negotiations.

Elders from Treaty Four and Six areas refer to the Cree concept of “*pimâcihowin* (the ability to make a living)” (Cardinal and Hildebrandt) that describes the spiritual, physical, and economic connection of First Nations as key to being able to make a living with the land. This integral concept informs traditional doctrines, laws, principles, values, and teachings about the sources of life and the accompanying responsibilities including “those elements seen as necessary for enhancing the spiritual components of life and those associated with making a living” (Cardinal and Hildebrandt 43). Elders indicated that the capacity of land to provide a livelihood is not only due to its

material capabilities but also the spiritual powers inherent in it. Thus, physical separation from land and resources entails spiritual and economic separation of First Nations from lands and resources that were once available to sustain them.

Treaty Elders in Saskatchewan view the treaties as

guaranteeing the continuing right of First Nations livelihood, and the continuing right to maintain a continuing relationship to the land, and its resources [which] constitutes one of the irrevocable and unchanging elements of the treaty relationship. (Cardinal and Hildebrandt 46)

---

### Competing government policies and private interests led to land surrenders and relocation to land that was insufficient in quantity and quality to engage in subsistence activities.

---

The length of time it has taken for government to recognize and begin to rectify First Nations land and resource loss is evidenced by the signing of Treaty Land Entitlement (TLE) Framework Agreements in Saskatchewan and Manitoba in 1992 and 1997, respectively. TLE agreements were finalized to end over 100 years of outstanding land debts owed to signatory First Nations. These agreements were made to ensure that the lands owed to entitled First Nations at the time of signing or adhering to a treaty were finally awarded. The agreements attempted to address the issues of loss of use of lands and resources over that long time period.

Agreements in Saskatchewan and Manitoba allow entitled First Nations to add to their land base but differ in the extent to which they provide resources to entitled First Nations to be able to build up their communities to a level of sustainability. For instance, Saskatchewan’s TLE agreement provided for shortfall acres to be acquired to constitute land that should have been included in the original Reserve as well as equity acres. Equity acres were derived from a formula that sought to account for the increase in a community’s population as well as the loss of use over time. These acres were then converted into a cash payment to be used for Band development, agriculture, recreation and culture, and education (Canada 23). In contrast, the majority of TLE Bands in Manitoba received small cash settlements that are not adequate for further development of lands and resources acquired under TLE agreement (Henley).

The loss of lands and resources that accompanied treaty implementation compromised sustainability for First Nations. Numerous scholars have studied First Nation populations and generated statistics about social and

economic conditions in terms of health status, living conditions and overall well-being by age, gender, geographic location and government status.<sup>3</sup> James Frideres portrays First Nations communities as having high unemployment and dependency on state funding; high infant mortality rates; high rates of suicide and substance abuse; lower levels of education and income; substandard housing accompanied by overcrowding and poor sanitation; a general lack of potable and safe water; poor transportation routes and accessibility as well as low levels of long-term economic development (Frideres and Gadacz). These conditions are directly related to a loss of land and access to resources as well as their health of the land (Adelson).

### **Oppression of First Nations Women**

Vandana Shiva, in discussing similar conditions in India, refers to imperialists who viewed land and resources as commodities for exploitation for profits by separating nature from humans. The effect of this separation is that nature is viewed as an external surrounding and not the sustainer of human existence. Shiva attributes this concept to Cartesian philosophy, a paradigm leading to development based on exploitation and domination of nature and the subjugation of ecological knowledge of colonized peoples. She further maintains that women, as the givers and producers of life, are in a privileged position to appreciate the principles of sustainability from not only a biological basis, but also historical and cultural bases because of "their role as providers of sustenance, food and water" (42). Shiva points to the work of Alice Schlegel who demonstrated that this role is present in subsistence societies where the roles of males and females are interdependent and complementary; conditions that create diversity but not necessarily inequality. It is the diversity of these roles that are destroyed by colonization.

The roles of First Nations women suffered the greatest subjugation when land and resources became a commodity. The effects of this subjugation are evident at a personal, community, and national level. Beginning in 1869, legislation began to discriminate against First Nations women in terms of their "status"<sup>4</sup> as registered Indians who were extended Aboriginal and, where applicable, treaty rights (Ouellette). Essentially, the identity of any First Nation woman was determined by her father's status and upon marriage, her husband's status (Brizinski). If a First Nation woman married a man who did not have status or was not an Indian, she became disenfranchised of her rights and benefits; First Nations men were not affected by this legislation. After a number of attempts, Indian women successfully lobbied for change to the *Indian Act* to remove this discrimination in 1985 with the passing of Bill C-31.

While this legislation gives disenfranchised individuals the right to have their status reinstated, the federal govern-

ment controls the degree to which benefits and rights may be passed on to their descendants by separating persons with reinstated status into "Full" and "Half" status (Brizinski 182). The responsibility for passing on status lies now with First Nations men and women who have status but causes subjugation at a community level as increased membership in communities have not been accompanied by increased funding, housing and land. Women who seek to return to Reserve communities are faced with a severe lack of housing and in some instances, membership codes that deny them the right live on the Reserve and access services (Voyageur). Within their communities, Aboriginal women hold administrative but not decision-making positions. Most community decisions are determined at the level of chief and council where "[t]here are only a handful of women chiefs" (Voyageur 98) perhaps because women are unable to gain sufficient community support to become chiefs or they are waiting until there are more women in council before holding the position of chief (Voyageur). Past experiences of First Nations women who have spoken out about inequality or injustice in their communities have reinforced their subjugation as they "are labeled as troublemakers and can face barriers in the subsequent encounters with the band" (Voyageur 99).

At a national level, First Nations women have organized themselves politically to speak on behalf of their concerns, out of necessity. During constitutional talks, The Native Women's Association<sup>5</sup> demanded a seat at the negotiation table and a portion of the funding allocated to male-dominated political organizations to ensure their issues would be addressed (Voyageur). For their troubles, male leadership, ironically elected and operating within the *Indian Act*, accused them of going against tradition by pursuing individual rights over the rights of the collective. As Grace Ouellette notes, the *Indian Act* "as an act of colonization in the subjugation of Indian people has often been overlooked" (31) making the struggles of Aboriginal women "[not] solely against male domination but rather one of liberation from the colonial policies and national oppression" (51). This complex agenda figures heavily in the pursuit of self-government by First Nations as women want to ensure that they have active participation in determining how their communities will be governed.

### **Sustainable Development as a Basic Right— Restoring Humanity**

Given the legacy of colonization in all aspects of the lives of First Nations, communities in Saskatchewan might well ask how they are to achieve sustainability on their newly acquired lands under TLE. Perhaps an effective way to approach this dilemma is to look at sustainable development as a basic right of individuals and communities rather than primarily as an economic strategy. Traditional

models of sustainable development tend to be based on concepts of individualism, rational choice, and market-based competition, thereby keeping the focus on commercial economic development rather than holistic measures of sustainability (Hessing). Furthermore, Melody Hessing concludes that such models have not led to more sustainable societies but have damaged the social and ecological foundations of those they were trying to help.

While Hessing and other feminist researchers seek to emphasize ecological and social dimensions to sustainability, it is important to note that First Nations in Canada face some unique constraints in trying to achieve their goals of sustainability. Ouellette, in her study of Aboriginal women's feminist perspectives in Canada states that some of these restraints include the *Indian Act*, provincial and federal legislation about lands and resources, and a colonial experience resulting in economic marginalization, political weakness, and cultural stigmatization within their own homelands. The conditions First Nations women find themselves in within their ancestral homelands raises unique issues of racism, national oppression, and colonialism that many Aboriginal women feel are best acted on by their own organizations. As Ouellette points out, principles of liberal feminism are neither appropriate nor applicable to most Aboriginal women due to their circumstances, politics, and conceptions of human nature. One contentious point is the place of motherhood and its responsibilities, viewed by most feminist theory as the source of women's subjugation. In contrast, for Aboriginal women, the ability to give life and nurture and care for others is a powerful key to the survival of Aboriginal peoples (Ouellette).

The *Indian Act*, as a colonial instrument of oppression, continues to affect the process of achieving sustainability in First Nation communities by providing legislative authority for policy decisions about First Nations' lands, resources, and livelihood. As Ouellette points out, "Despite many revisions, the *Indian Act* continues to define and regulate the lives of Indian people [in Canada] in every respect. It is legislation designed exclusively for them" (31). In addition, provincial and federal legislation govern the use of lands for subsistence activities and place limits on quantities of resource harvests in the interests of balancing conservation concerns, Aboriginal rights to resources and the promotion of sport/pleasure/tourism access to resources.

In Saskatchewan, treaty rights were consolidated in 1930 with the passage of the *Natural Resources Transfer Act* that gave the provinces the right to make legislation regarding lands and resources outside of federal lands (including Indian Reserves) and to control resource harvest within their respective provincial boundaries. Under this legislation, Indian peoples in Saskatchewan and Manitoba are now restricted to hunting and fishing for food only, and not for commercial purposes, on a year-round basis. While treaty rights to hunt and fish have been

restricted, some scholars have pointed to the expansion of harvest rights to cover the entire area of a province rather than being confined to a treaty area (Issac).

However, this "generous" move on the part of the Crown did not take place with the consultation of First Nations, thereby ignoring the conditions under which First Nations governed resource harvest amongst their traditional territories. If a First Nation wanted to harvest resources outside of their treaty or traditional area, protocol dictated that an agreement to enter another First Nation's territory and harvest resources required a negotiated agreement to share that territory (Cardinal and Hildebrandt). Provincial legislation provides authority to government bureaucracy to redefine relationships without the consent or input of First Nations communities. In turn, conflict has resulted when these arrangements have been altered, leading to overharvesting of resources in some areas and subsequent restrictions applied by provincial legislation in the name of conservation.<sup>6</sup> In the end, those who suffer the greatest hardship are those who can least afford it—First Nations communities whose members depend on harvested resources for economic, social, and cultural survival.

An example of the effects of redefining relationships has occurred in north central Saskatchewan in the community of Witchekan Lake First Nation. In 1947, the community was assigned a trapping block, for their exclusive use, prior to their adhesion to Treaty Six in 1950. The six-mile square area was a portion of the community's traditional lands used for trapping, hunting, fishing, and foraging as well as social gathering and healing. In the 1960s, the community was approached and gave permission for grazing leases in the trapping block. Problems arose when a grazing lease was issued during the 1970s to a rancher under a revised *Wildlife Act* that gave the rancher the authority to deny access to anyone to his leased area. A lawyer from Saskatchewan Justice stated that "The radical changes to the rights of the trappers made in 1979 was apparently done without notice to them and, perhaps, without any real consciousness of what was being done to their interests" (Crane as qtd. in McLeod 109).

The rancher erected fences, and harassed trappers from Witchekan Lake First Nation. Trappers complained to authorities about being shot at, having traps stolen and finding traps flung into trees. At the same time as he was denying access to trappers from Witchekan Lake First Nation, the rancher was himself trapping, without a license. He admitted to trapping 200 beaver in at least two trapping seasons. No one came to the aid of the trappers between 1972 and 1992. The results of these activities was that trapping by the First Nation community ceased in the northern half of their trapping block while the southern half remained inaccessible because of swampy terrain and lacked a road. Thus, community members had a sharp decline in subsistence activity vital to their survival. They were forced to trap around the immediate area of Witchekan

and Sylvander Lakes, which provided primarily muskrats and a few beaver for furs and food. The resource rich area of the larger trapping block was made unavailable for subsistence activities, social gathering and healing.

In an attempt to settle over 20 years of conflict, an agricultural lease was created in 1992 for the northern half of the trapping block that provided the rancher and trappers with separate access periods to the area. The agreement is for a 33-year period but does not guarantee access for trappers at this point in time. Provincial conservation officers have tended to respond enthusiastically to concerns of the rancher's family about hunting carried out by First Nations people, even outside of the rancher's access period. This atmosphere has left community members from Witchekan Lake apprehensive about exercising their rights to the trapping block but also angry at what they perceive to be the destruction of their way of life.

To further demonstrate the lack of consultation and redefining of relationships, the southern half of the trapping block is now under a grazing lease with a number of different ranchers. The rancher with the largest grazing lease owns land adjoining the trapping block and has been permitted to fence the road allowance with a locked gate that allows him to grant and deny access to the trapping block. The provincial government departments of Saskatchewan Environment and Resource Management (SERM) and Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food permitted this condition in response to the landowner's concerns about illegal hunting when his cattle are in the leased area.<sup>7</sup> The community of Witchekan Lake First Nation was not consulted about this lease or the denial of access to the trapping block. In fact, the community is not aware of when the southern half of their trapping block came under a grazing lease.

Interviews with the women of Witchekan Lake First Nation demonstrated hidden effects of the bureaucratic conflict over the trapping block. Some women in this community expressed concern for the safety of the hunters and trappers.<sup>8</sup> Although none of the women spoke of being directly harassed by SERM officers, they viewed the diligence of SERM officers as a threat to providing additional food and proper nutrition for their families. As well, they were concerned about the safety and comfort of their husbands on overnight trips as SERM has consistently prohibited the construction of a cabin or shelter on the trapping block for the use of community members. The lack of proper road access to the trapping block and lack of cabin or shelter for their husbands, placed a burden on some women, especially those with young children. These women drove their husbands to the edge of the trapping block so they could hunt during the day, returning later in the day to pick their husbands up, which usually coincided with the arrival of the school bus. When women were not able to drive their husbands, hunting ceased and families became dependent on store bought groceries.

Witchekan Lake First Nation sees the trapping block as

vital to their survival and well-being, even though they have been unable to make a viable living from trapping. Not one person interviewed in the years between 1997 and 2001 stated that the trapping area should be let go from the community. In contrast, each individual wanted to see the area retained by the community for a variety of reasons. Some people saw the area as a refuge if the welfare system ever collapsed while others saw it as a vital area for retaining teachings about the land and relationships. Others still regarded the Bland Lake area as a place to heal physically, emotionally and mentally and to regain an overall sense of well-being and cultural pride. These reasons clearly demonstrate the nature of sustainability to Witchekan Lake First Nation and the importance of the land in achieving and maintaining sustainability. However, their experiences with government officials and ranchers have all too clearly reminded them of their economic marginalization, political weakness and cultural stigmatization in voicing their rights to the trapping block as a source of subsistence.

As clearly demonstrated by the situation at Witchekan Lake, First Nations, as Reserve communities, have continuous and intimate knowledge of their traditional lands. First Nations' definitions and perspectives on sustainability in terms of, among others, the socioeconomic, ecological, epistemological, psychological and political conditions that are necessary for sustainability should be heard.<sup>9</sup> Employing a purely economic model of sustainable development is akin to modernization strategies of "fixing" the socioeconomic situation in First Nations communities by generating revenue through economic growth. To be sure, economics are important to the sustainability of First Nation communities, but so are other aspects of community survival and sustainability that require a more holistic approach that must come from inside and not outside of communities.

Perhaps the greatest source of information for achieving this goal lies with First Nations women in their communities who employ a pragmatic and respectful approach towards the environment. John G. Bretting and Diane-Michele Prindeville note that unlike Indigenous women of Spanish descent, Native American women do not see themselves as only environmental stewards but also as spiritually connected to nature which provides them with direction for living (155). Interestingly enough, Manitoba's *Principles and Guidelines of Sustainable Development* lists stewardship as its second principle, describing Manitobans as "caretakers of the economy, the environment, human health and social well-being for the benefit of present and future generations" (Manitoba). This document does not consider the possibility of the environment being the caretaker and maintains the separateness of humans from the environment with the latter requiring the management skills of humans.

The National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy (NRTEE) focused heavily on management

aspects in developing resource policy around the sustainability of Aboriginal communities in Canada. Its report entitled *Aboriginal Communities and Non-Renewable Resource Development* points to the 1998 document *Gathering Strength: Canada's Aboriginal Action Plan* objectives of renewing the partnerships between Aboriginal peoples and the government, strengthening Aboriginal governance, developing a new fiscal relationship and supporting strong communities, people and economies (116). While NRTEE claims to have relied on Aboriginal experience in developing its policy, the document reflects little of the spiritual relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the resources. Policy remains focused on economic benefits while promoting capacity-building of Aboriginal peoples in land, environment and resource management through co-management.

Capacity building in First Nations communities cannot stop at providing leadership and work skills for economic participation. First Nations are entitled to meaningful and long-term participation that allows for sustainability, as defined by their communities. This definition will vary from community to community based on needs, lands, resources and each community's vision of sustainability for its members, lands and resources. First Nations communities are not a homogeneous group nor does each community have the same type of land and resources. Therefore, blanket solutions for sustainability cannot be applied to First Nations communities, particularly when there is a lack of knowledge about the visions and constraints First Nations hold for a good life in their communities.

## Conclusion

First Nations communities made arrangements to receive newcomers and shared the land with them, negotiating treaties to ensure that the traditional ways of life for First Nations would be upheld and respected. Economics was a valid concern as treaties and settlement of the lands followed on the decline of the fur trade, signaling a change in land and resource use for First Nations and newcomers alike. Although relatively few attempts have been made to capture the essence of First Nations' perspectives on treaty-making, Elders in Saskatchewan have been clear about the continuous rights of First Nations to maintain a connection to land and resources in a way that guarantees the survival and well-being of the present and future generations. In essence, this concept broadly defines sustainability.

However, what is lacking is the knowledge of how First Nations envision sustainability today. Like feminist research that points to the importance of broadening sustainable development beyond the economic to include social and ecological dimensions, First Nations communities consider these dimensions important to sustainability. However, First Nations are faced with

creating a good life in the face of economic marginalization, political weakness, and cultural stigmatization, as nations, in their own homelands. Exploring the visions and strategies of these communities in their struggle can contribute to a wider understanding of sustainability.

In the face of the colonial experience, First Nations women retained their traditional roles to maintain culture, care for future generations, and steady their communities (Voyageur). In addition, First Nations women have spoken out about the conditions they face, advocating and working for political and social change, balanced with cultural values of harmony, mutual respect, and equality.

*Brenda McLeod is currently a Ph.D. student at the Natural Resources Institute, University of Manitoba. Her past research includes a land use and occupancy study of one First Nation and the Settler population in the Witchehan Lake area of Saskatchewan as well as land claims research. Her current research project explores sustainability from First Nations perspectives in Saskatchewan through community-based research with treaty land entitlement communities.*

<sup>1</sup>The term First Nations is used in this paper to refer to Indian peoples who are descendants of the original treaty signatories in Saskatchewan and Manitoba. The term Aboriginal is used to include Indian, Metis, Non-Status Indian and Inuit peoples in Canada. The term Indigenous refers globally to Aboriginal peoples.

<sup>2</sup>The term "Reserve" is capitalized throughout this paper in an attempt to decolonize the term while dispelling ethnocentric perceptions about its diminished social significance. A Reserve is the remaining homeland of a First Nation in Canada and is a distinct outcome of a defined process and as such, is a proper noun.

<sup>3</sup>See the works of Frideres and Gadacz. Previous editions of this work document the conditions and lack of change in the social and economic status of Aboriginal communities in Canada.

<sup>4</sup>The term status refers to a government designation that an Indian person is registered under the *Indian Act* as an Indian and who is entitled to rights and benefits as well as restrictions. Signatories to treaties and their descendants are considered to be registered Indians with these entitlements as well as the rights and benefits of the treaty they are attached to.

<sup>5</sup>The mandate of the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) is "a collective goal to enhance, promote, and foster the social, economic, cultural and political well-being of First Nations and Metis women within Aboriginal and Canadian societies" (qtd. in Ouellette 53). In discussing organizational structure, Ouellette notes that in 1989, 14 years after its inception, NWAC moved from a hierarchical structure to one modeled after the Four Directions.

<sup>6</sup>Elders interviewed in the Witchehan Lake area in north central Saskatchewan in 1997 questioned the quotas set

for the community on the number of moose they can hunt on an annual basis. Moose, a staple of traditional diet, is currently highly prized for food. For a number of years, SERM has been concerned with a declining moose population in the province, implementing conservation measures by restricting hunting quotas and areas.

<sup>7</sup>Personal communication with a SERM official December 10, 2001.

<sup>8</sup>I conducted these interviews in 2001 for a research report for the community.

<sup>9</sup>I am borrowing this list of conditions from Wackernagel. However, First Nations may have differing or additional conditions regarding sustainability.

## References

- Adelson, Naomi. *Being Alive Well: Health and the Politics of Cree Well-Being*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002.
- Bretting, John G. and Diane-Michele Prindeville. "Environmental Justice and the Role of Indigenous Women Organizing Their Communities. In *Environmental Injustices, Political Struggles: Race, Class and the Environment*. Ed. David E. Comancho. London: Duke University Press, 1998. 141-164.
- Brizinski, Peggy M. *Knots In A String: An Introduction to Native Studies in Canada*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Saskatoon: University Extension Press, 1993.
- Canada. *The 1992 Saskatchewan Treaty Land Entitlement Framework Agreement*.
- Cardinal, Harold and Walter Hildebrandt. *Treaty Elders of Saskatchewan: Our Dream Is That Our Peoples Will One Day Be Clearly Recognized As Nations*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2000.
- Carter, Sarah. *Lost Harvests: Prairies Indian Reserve Farmers and Government Policy*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 1990.
- Chamberlin, J. Edward. "Culture and Anarchy in Indian Country." *Aboriginal and Treaty Rights In Canada: Essays on Law, Equity, and Respect for Difference*. Ed. Michael Asch. Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997. 3-37.
- Dickason, Olive P. *Canada's First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples From Earliest Times*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Frideres, James S. and Rene R. Gadacz. *Aboriginal Peoples In Canada: Contemporary Conflicts*. 6<sup>th</sup> ed. Toronto: Prentice Hall, 2001.
- Henley, Thomas. Natural Resources Institute, University of Manitoba. Personal Communication, February, 2003.
- Hessing, Melody. "Sustainable Livelihoods, Part I: Introduction." Online: Gender and Sustainable Development. [http://www.royalroads.ca/ste/research/gender/AB\\_Live1.html](http://www.royalroads.ca/ste/research/gender/AB_Live1.html). Retrieved 25 May 2003.
- Issac, Thomas. *Aboriginal Law: Cases, Materials and Commentary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Saskatoon: Purich Publishing, 1999.
- Lambrecht, Kirk N. *The Administration of Dominion Lands, 1870-1930*. Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 1991.
- Manitoba. Manitoba Conservation. Environmental Stewardship Division. Sustainable Resource Management Branch. <http://www.gov.mb.ca/conservation/susresmb/principle-susdev/index.html>. Retrieved 02 February 2003.
- McLeod, Brenda V. "Treaty Land Entitlement in Saskatchewan: Conflicts in Land Use and Occupancy in the Witchekean Lake Area." Unpublished Thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 2001.
- National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy. *Aboriginal Communities and Non-Renewable Resource Development*. Ottawa: National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy, 2001.
- Ouellette, Grace. *The Fourth World: An Indigenous Perspective on Feminism and Aboriginal Women's Activism*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2002.
- Shiva, Vandana. *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. New Jersey: Zed Books, 1987.
- Tough, Frank. *As Their Natural Resources Fail: Native Peoples and the Economic History of Northern Manitoba, 1870-1930*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1996.
- Voyageur, Cora J. "Contemporary Aboriginal Women in Canada." *Visions of the Heart: Canadian Aboriginal Issues*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Eds. David Long and Olive P. Dickason. Toronto: Harcourt Canada, 2000. 81-106.
- Wackernagel, Mathias. "Framing the Sustainability Crisis: Getting From Concern to Action." October, 1997. Online: Sustainable Development Research Institute, [http://www.sdri.ubc.ca/publications/discussion\\_papers.cfm](http://www.sdri.ubc.ca/publications/discussion_papers.cfm)

DANIELLE VILLENEUVE

UNKNOWN

Behind the truest lies, within the transparent eyes,  
There's a story to tell, a secret dying to sell.  
A truth beyond essence, that has altered our presence,  
A peculiar unknown, that is dying to be shown.

*Danielle Villeneuve is a grade 11 student in London, Ontario. She enjoys writing poetry, drawing, running and many sports.*