The Land: Part One

***After reading the pages below, respond to the following question in a series of detailed, well-developed paragraphs:***

***How do Aboriginal peoples view the land, and, what issues affect Aboriginal peoples' relationship with the land today? How does the future look for Aboriginal land issues?***

***Some sub-questions to consider, or perhaps use to form your paragraphs around:***

* ***How do Aboriginal peoples in Canada view the land and how do these views influence their beliefs and actions?***
* ***What issues affect Aboriginal people’s relationship with the land today and how is this relationship evolving?***
* ***Why is it so difficult to resolve conflicts over land in Canada?***

**Assessment**

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| **Criteria / Level** | **Level 4** | **Level 3** | **Level 2** | **Level 1** |
| Application | Research is present, thoroughly completed and has been applied to essay response | Research is present and complete | Research is present and somewhat complete | Research is present, but of limited detail |
| Knowledge | Response is thoroughly supported with accurate details | Response is considerably well supported with accurate details | Response contains some support | Response contains limited support |
| Thinking | Absolutely none of the response has been copied from the handout. All thoughts have clearly been generated by the student | Some of the response has been more or less copied from the handout | Significant portions of the response have been copied from the handout | The students has obviously hoped they might answer the question by patching together random bits from the handout |

Land and Resources

*“The clear cutting of the land, and the destruction of the forest is an attack on our people. The land is the basis of who we are. Our culture is a land-based culture and the destruction of the land is the destruction of our culture. And we know that is in the plans. The pulp and paper company doesn’t want us on the land, they want us out of the way so they can take the resources. We can’t allow them to carry on with this cultural genocide.”*

* ***Roberta Keesick, Anishinaabe grandmother, trapper and blockader at the Grassy Narrows First Nation in northern Ontario***

For countless generations, Aboriginal peoples have depended on the land to meet their economic, spiritual, and cultural needs. The land provided early self-governing communities with everything they required to have a good life.

As a result, communities came to know their land very well. They knew the animals and their habits, where to hunt deer, and when to harvest salmon. They knew the plants and their and their medicinal powers, where to pick salmonberries, and how to find herbs such as sage. They knew the sacred places and the best routes for getting from one place to another. This knowledge enhanced the abilities of the peoples to meet their needs within a particular place.

Aboriginal peoples’ close connection to the land is reflected in their creation stories. The Algonquin story of the Giant Beaver describes the formation of the physical features of the Ottawa River valley. Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee stories tell how Turtle Island was created on a turtle’s back with mud from the bottom of a great body of water. Such stories echo the theme that humans survived only through a deep understanding of the natural environment and a relationship with all of creation. The names that many First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples have for their own territories also indicate their attachment to the land. Innu (singular of “Inuit) of Quebec and Labrador call their territory *Nitassinan*, James Bay Cree call theirs *Eeyou Istchee*, Haida of British Columbia refer to *Haida Gwaii*, and Inuit of the North to *Nunavut*. These names and others like them have one element in common: they all mean “our land.”

**Different World Views, Different Decisions**

As you have learned, many Aboriginal peoples view the land as Mother Earth. They believe it is a gift from the Creator. They believe that to sustain themselves and live well, people need to use and develop the land’s resources in a respectful way, using their **Traditional Ecological Knowledge**[[1]](#endnote-1). The depth, scale, and pace of development must be considered so that people can adapt to it and it does not harm the land. Sufficient resources must remain available for future generations.

Many non-Aboriginal business people and government officials have not shared this world view. Their primary interest in the land has been the value of its resources, such as timber, minerals, oil, water, and diamonds. They have wanted to develop the land in order to extract and sell these resources for a profit, whether by logging, mining, constructing hydroelectric projects. They have also made job creation a priority. Until recently, their attitudes often have not reflected a concern about the sustainability of the development activities or their impact on the environment.

The way of life for many Aboriginal peoples remains strongly tied to their homelands, and whatever affects these lands has a profound effect on the people as well. They know that they, and especially their Elders, are the custodians of valuable traditional ecological knowledge about their land. They believe they have a right, as well as a responsibility, to have more control over these lands and resources and to share equally in their bounty. They have tried to make their voices heard on these matters. They have used a range of strategies, such as letter-writing, petitions, lawsuits, media campaigns, and, occasionally, direct action strategies such as blockades.

The Ardoch Algonquin First Nation in eastern Ontario had been nurturing its traditional rice beds for more than a century. In 1981, when the province of Ontario sold the harvesting rights to a non-Aboriginal company for a minimal fee, without the consent of the Ardoch Algonquin First Nation, the people objected. It was only after a 27-day blockade that the province returned harvesting rights to them.

**The People of Grassy Narrows**

The Grassy Narrows community in northwestern Ontario is the home of the Asubpeechoseewagong Fist Nation who are also known as the Grassy Narrows First Nation. The reserve was created on the Wabogoon-English river system following the signing of Treaty 3 in 1873. In 1963, the people were moved from a location on the river’s bays and inlets to a location about eight kilometres further inland. Here, the houses were crowded together, rather than each home having its own piece of land.

About the same time, a pulp-and-paper mill owned by Reed Incorporated and, later, Great Lakes Forest Products Limited, was built upriver and released many tonnes of toxic chemicals, including mercury, into the river. The Grassy Plains First Nation could no longer eat the fish, which has always been their main source of protein. Their commercial fishery closed, and they lost the income they had been making as fishing guides. They also began to suffer the effects of mercury poisoning, which includes birth defects. These problems were formally identified in 1970. However, it was almost 15 years before the people received compensation from the company and the federal and provincial governments.

Then, in 1999, the province gave a logging company the right to clear-cut the First Nation’s traditional lands. The people felt their way of life was under attack again and that their treaty rights were being violated. In 2002, they blockaded access to the logging site, an action that continued for years. In 2006, Steve Fobister, the deputy chief of the band council, vowed “to take all necessary actions to protect our homeland from further desecration.” In 2008, the company agreed to stop further logging. A formal agreement that specifies the role of the First Nation in determining further use of the land has not yet been signed.

**Sharing in Land Development**

Aboriginal peoples have never been opposed to resource development in principle. When it occurs on traditional lands, however, they wish to be consulted and to receive a fair share of the revenue (profit) and jobs the development produces. Because of a recent Canadian court decision, governments now must consult First Nations *before* taking any action that might infringe on Aboriginal treaty rights. Sometimes this decision has resulted in Aboriginal peoples’ co-owning and co-managing major development projects – and sometimes it had not.

For example; in 2009, the Ontario government revised the Mining Act. Among other changes, mining companies must consult with First Nation peoples about exploration activities on their traditional lands, and new mines in northern Ontario may not open without a community-based land-use plan in place.

Also, in 2010, the Ontario government passed the Far North Act to protect half of the lands in Ontario’s Far North (225 000 square kilometres) and ensure sustainable development of the North’s resources. Dozens of First Nations in the region, including the 49 First Nation members of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation, opposed the controversial legislation. The law did ensure a community-based process requiring First Nations approval of which areas will be protected and which ones will be developed. However, First Nations protested that they were not adequately consulted about how much land should be set aside for protection, nor was land-use planning done in order to reach this decision. As a result they did not recognize the new legislation.

1. A specialized term that means the knowledge about a particular ecosystem that has been developed over an enormous period of time living in and with that ecosystem [↑](#endnote-ref-1)