

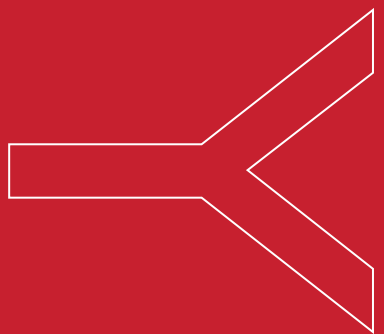
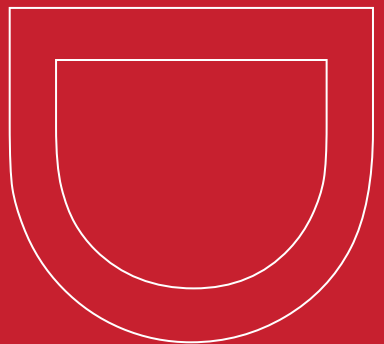
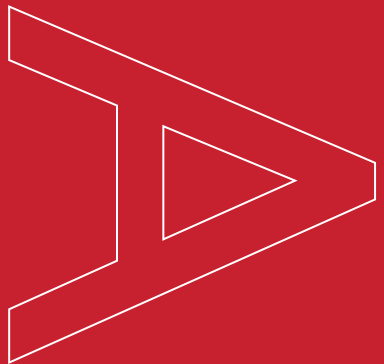
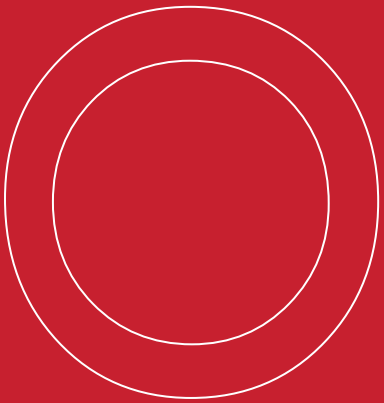
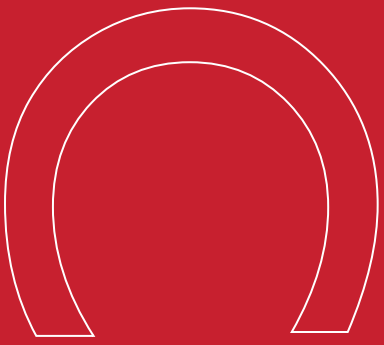
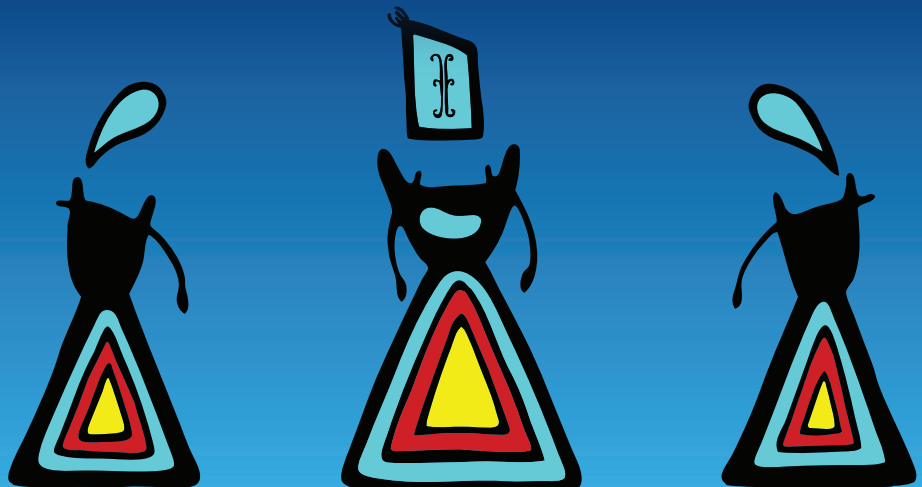
# INDIGENOUS WOMEN IN COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP CASE STUDIES

## Fort McKay First Nation Alberta

Gabrielle Donnelly

INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP  
COADY INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE  
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### **About the Indigenous Women in Community Leadership program logo (front cover illustration)**

Painting by Melissa S. Labrador, Mi'kmaw artist

This painting, named *The Teachings*, represents three generations of women standing on Mother Earth beneath the blue hues of our universe. One of the most important teachings is survival and the ability to understand connections on earth. If you were to remove the soil and look beneath it, you would find that all life above ground is protected and held together by the roots of trees. Those roots intermingle to create strength in the forest community. If each of us, regardless of background, would hold hands and unite, we too could grow strong communities.

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**Fort McKay First Nation, Alberta**  
Gabrielle Donnelly

Thank you to Coady Institute staff and associates  
who have provided editorial comments and changes.

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All quotations in this case study, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from a video documentary, Fort McKay First Nation (2011), by Catherine Martin.

# Fort McKay First Nation, Alberta

## Introduction

The story of the survival of Fort McKay First Nation, amidst the monumental socioeconomic and environmental changes that have occurred here in the last 50 years, is also a story of women's resilience. In many ways it is a familiar tale - an Aboriginal community losing its traditional way of life; yet this tale is distinctly shaped by the discovery of oil reserves deep in the sacred land of their ancestors. Today, Fort McKay is a community carving out - and struggling with - its new identity in the space between the brave new world of a booming oil industry and the traditions of the past.

This case study will explore the unique circumstances that have accompanied the development of Alberta's oil sands. It will also delve into the lives of several women who have been navigating these circumstances for themselves and their community. They are representative of the diversity found in Fort McKay: of Cree, Dene, or Métis descent; from young to well-established; from entrepreneurs to band leaders. We will examine the assets these women deem vital for shaping their lives, as well as the questions that remain alive for them as they chart the future.

## Context

The rich oral histories of the Cree and Dene (Chipewyan) people date back 8,000 years in the Athabasca region of northern Alberta (Athabasca Tribal Council, 2010). The landscape of this region has been largely shaped by the Athabasca River, which originates from the glaciers of the Columbia Icefield, high in the Rocky Mountains, and weaves its way through mountains, forests and prairies for more than 1,000 km before reaching Fort McKay<sup>1</sup>. Legendary for plentiful populations of rainbow trout, pike and whitefish, as well as for its fertile banks where berries grow in abundance, attracting large numbers of moose and other animals, the Athabasca allowed countless generations of Aboriginal people to live off its riches.

Like most Aboriginal communities across Canada, Fort McKay has undergone dramatic changes in recent decades. The 20th century witnessed the demise of the traditional subsistence hunting, fishing and gathering (Fort McKay First Nation, 1994), as well as a steep decline of commercial fur trapping since the 1980s. In a further blow to the increasingly impoverished community, many of Fort McKay's children were sent to residential schools, which accelerated the loss of native cultural traditions and languages.

Although the future did not seem to hold much promise for Fort McKay, this remote outpost nestled in the heart of a vast, unspoiled wilderness embarked on a bold new chapter when the development of the Athabasca oil sands—found to contain the largest deposits of heavy crude oil (bitumen) in the world—began in earnest in the late 1960s.

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<sup>1</sup> Located 60 km north of Fort McMurray and 450 km northeast of Edmonton, Fort McKay First Nation is a community of about 600 Cree, Dene and Métis people (Statistics Canada, 2007).

### Box 1. Glimpses of the Athabasca Oil Sands History

Aboriginal people living along the Athabasca River had been using the sticky bitumen oozing out of its banks to patch their canoes long before the oil sands were “discovered” by European explorers in the late 18th century. Starting in 1875, Canada’s government initiated surveys of the oil sands as a potential source of petroleum. As early as 1883, these explorations found that water would wash the oil off the sand grains; and in 1888, Robert Bell of the Geological Survey of Canada reported to a Senate Committee that “The evidence... points to the existence in the Athabasca and Mackenzie valleys of the most extensive petroleum field in America, if not the world.”

The first attempts to develop the oil sands commercially were based on the assumption that the bitumen must be coming from pools of oil deep beneath the surface. In an effort to locate these pools, about two dozen wells were sunk in the Athabasca region between 1906 and 1917. None of these wells found the mother lode of oil, but they did discover salt - which would become a major industry in the Fort McMurray area for 50 years.

Further steps to tap into the area’s vast bitumen resources were taken in 1913, when Sidney Ells, a young engineer with the federal Department of Mines, started experimenting with the hot water flotation method of separating bitumen from sand. In the course of these experiments, several tons of oil sand were shipped to Edmonton to be tested as road paving material. The results were apparently regarded as promising, leading to the establishment, in 1921, of the first enterprise dedicated to oil sands development (named International Bitumen Company). The Athabasca bitumen proved good for roofing and road surfacing, but because it could not compete economically with imported asphalt, the project was dropped.

In the 1920s, Karl Clark of the University of Alberta brought a new level of ingenuity to experiments with a hot water flotation process. After shoveling some oil sand into the family washing machine and adding hot water and caustic soda, he discovered that the bitumen floated to the surface as frothy foam, ready to be skimmed off. In the ensuing decades, several attempts were made to implement Clark’s method on an industrial scale, with varying degrees of success. It wasn’t until 1967 that the Great Canadian Oil Sands (now Suncor) began the first commercially viable oil sands mining operation using surface-active substances in the separation process.

*Sources: George (1998); Hein (2005).*

Throughout the 1970s, the Athabasca oil sands were developed without the participation of the area’s Aboriginal residents, and without paying heed to the constitutionally-recognized land treaties between the First Nations and the institutions of the Canadian state. But with the collapse of the fur trade at the turn of the 1980s, the people of Fort McKay became painfully aware that accessing the jobs and economic prosperity that the oil industry was creating in the region was a vital step to take if they were going to carry their community forward into the future. They also realized that they needed to familiarize themselves with current trends in natural resource and business management, and to improve their community’s administration, infrastructure and education levels in order to catch up with the oil industry’s demands.

Taking a decisive step towards Fort McKay's re-emergence as a self-determining community, its members began pursuing negotiations with the Government of Canada in the early 1980s over the implementation of Treaty 8. The negotiations were spearheaded by Dorothy McDonald-Hyde, the first female Chief of Fort McKay, who contended that the Crown had failed to comply with its Treaty obligations related to land.

### **Box 2. Basic Facts about Treaty 8**

Between 1871 and 1921, the Crown signed a series of 11 treaties with Aboriginal peoples, which granted the Government of Canada vast tracts of land throughout the Prairies, Canadian North, and Northwestern Ontario for European settlement and industrial use. In return for giving up their rights to these areas, the First Nations were promised smaller parcels of land as reserves, annual annuity payments, the provision of health care and education services, implements to farm, or fish, and the right to continue to hunt and fish on the surrendered land. Treaty 8, signed on June 21, 1899, was the most comprehensive of these agreements. The area ceded under the treaty comprised 840,000 km<sup>2</sup>, encompassing much of present-day northern Alberta, northeastern British Columbia, northwestern Saskatchewan and a southernmost portion of the Northwest Territories.

The treaty guaranteed Aboriginal residents in this area the right to maintain their traditional way of life in perpetuity: "As long as the sun shines and the rivers flow and the hills don't move, no curtailment of any game regulation will be imposed, and you will be free to trap, hunt and fish as you wish." The treaty also provided for reserves on the basis of 640 acres per family of five, as well as allowing 160 acres for every Band member who elected to live apart from the reserve.

Treaty 8 has proven to be fraught with numerous issues, some of which remain debatable to this day. The ongoing debates revolve around concerns over land claims, interpretation of treaty rights, encroachment of industry on treaty lands, and the social and economic implications for the 39 First Nation communities the treaty covers.

*Source: Fumoleau (2004).*

McDonald-Hyde's painstaking, self-sacrificing efforts to uphold the well-being of her community provided a blueprint for overcoming the historically paternalistic relationship between the federal government and First Nations in Canada. After nearly two decades, the negotiations reached a historic milestone - the Treaty Land Entitlement (TLE) Settlement Agreement, which provided compensation and additional reserve land that Fort McKay First Nation was entitled to according to Treaty 8.

These developments have far-ranging implications for Fort McKay, which are yet to be fully grasped. Catapulted from a "have-not" community into a whirlwind of economic activities that offer ample opportunities for achieving prosperity, Fort McKay is forging new paths that require a thoughtful and critical engagement with "development" and the careful preservation of ancestral traditions and the very land to which they are inextricably linked. At the forefront of this process are the women of Fort McKay who have found in the lives of their elders the gems of knowledge and wisdom that provide a crucial foundation for building a viable future for their community.

## Themes

This section will look into the human assets that Fort McKay primarily draws upon as it is exploring ways to achieve economic self-sufficiency and social self-reliance. Along with the newly emerged economic opportunities, the community's female social capital is an indispensable resource for building sustainable wealth. The women leaders and activists of Fort McKay are devoted to their community and willing to implement their visionary ideas for its benefit. These qualities are crucial for Fort McKay as it finds itself at the heart of industrial development that carries the promise of economic prosperity for its residents while at the same time threatening to destroy what is left of their ancestral land and culture.

### *Leadership*

Recent developments in Fort McKay owe a great deal to the leadership of Dorothy McDonald-Hyde (1946-2005). The first woman to have been elected chief of Fort McKay First Nation, in 1980, she held this post for four consecutive two-year terms. During her tenure, McDonald-Hyde firmly established herself in the role that would become her signature - "a real fighter for the community"<sup>2</sup>:

[S]he campaigned for modern necessities such as running water, better housing, sewage and fire fighting services for the hamlet. She also took on industry when their activities threatened to encroach on and pollute First Nation land. In 1981, McDonald-Hyde led a highly publicized roadblock when a logging company tried to build a highway through Fort McKay. With the government's help, McDonald negotiated with the company to stop construction (Liepins, 2005).

In 1983, Dorothy McDonald-Hyde personally brought charges against Suncor's plant in Fort McMurray for spilling oil, grease and chemicals into the Athabasca River, which had contaminated Fort McKay's water supply. Her court victory set a legal precedent for accountability in the oil industry's relationships with Aboriginal communities in Canada (Carter, Erickson, Roome, & Smith, 2005).

Dorothy McDonald-Hyde was a special kind of leader who battled against injustice wherever she saw her people suffering from it. In 1985, she tackled inequities in the federal law over women's rights. Specifically, she challenged the 1951 Indian Act provision which stripped Aboriginal women of their treaty rights if they married men who were not status Indians. Her actions laid the groundwork for Bill C-31, which returned treaty rights and accompanying benefits to more than 60,000 Aboriginal women across Canada (Fort McKay First Nation, 2005).

It was McDonald-Hyde's ability to think ahead of the curve that prompted Fort McKay to start taking advantage of the opportunities presented by industrial development in the region. As her daughter Dayle remembers, "She decided that we needed to move with the changes and become a part of the new community that was emerging . . . , [that] we had to change ourselves because everything around us was changing."

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<sup>2</sup> These are words of her husband, Rod Hyde (in Liepins, 2005).



Dorothy McDonald-Hyde acknowledged that the demise of trapping meant the loss of an essential livelihood for her community. In search of a viable alternative, she turned her gaze to the assets that Fort McKay could contribute to regional economic development. In 1986, she established the Fort McKay Group of Companies intended to provide a variety of services to the nearby oil sands operations. Launched with a single janitorial contract, the Group has now grown into a highly respected diversified enterprise providing services in heavy equipment operation, bulk fuel and lube delivery, warehouse logistics, road and grounds maintenance, environmental monitoring and remediation, and land leasing operations (Fort McKay Group of Companies, 2010).

In keeping with her life's mission of helping her people attain lasting wealth, McDonald-Hyde was also the driving force behind the claim they filed with the Government of Canada in 1987, which sought to settle the debt owed to Fort McKay First Nation for not receiving all the land promised under Treaty 8. The landmark TLE Settlement Agreement, finalized in 2004, prescribed the transfer of 23,000 acres of land back to the Band. Approximately 8,200 acres of this land hold very significant oil sands deposits, which would enable the First Nation community to achieve economic self-sufficiency. An even larger portion (10,000 acres) was set aside to preserve traditional land use practices.

Apart from the transfer of land, the TLE Agreement also provided Fort McKay with \$41.5 million in compensation for the loss of land use, and cash in lieu of their outstanding treaty entitlements. This revenue has been placed in a Fort McKay Settlement Trust to preserve the funds for future generations and provide annual investment and revenue income for all Band members. At the signing ceremony of the TLE Agreement, held on June 30, 2006, Fort McKay's Chief Jim Boucher commemorated McDonald-Hyde's inspired and dedicated leadership in the Band's quest to restore the treaty rights vital to its future:

This agreement . . . honours the commitments and sacrifices of former leaders including Chief Dorothy McDonald and Elders to our Treaty rights. . . . After 20 years of negotiations, Fort McKay now has the land and fiscal resources to pursue its goal of financial independence. We are now able to play a significant role in the oil sands exploration and regional economic development while ensuring that there are adequate reserve lands for our traditional way of life (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2006)

## ***Guidance from the Elders***

One common trait among the women of Fort McKay holding positions of influence in local business or community affairs, is that they all emphasize the importance of knowledge and advice provided by their elders in shaping their own paths to leadership.

Dorothy McDonald-Hyde's daughter, Dayle Hyde, brings this to light as she narrates her mother's - and her own - story: "My grandfather told my mother that she needed to get an education in order to come back and help her community." This advice, along with the examples of her mother and her father, Rod Hyde - who devoted over 30 years to the Fort McKay School as a

teacher and principal<sup>3</sup> - would become the driving force behind Dayle's own life.

Early in life, Dayle resolved that she would work for the betterment of her community through education, and having earned a degree in Native Studies from the University of Alberta, she is now fulfilling her pledge as the training and development officer for Fort McKay First Nation. "You persevere through education," Dayle says. "Anything new is scary, but if you have a plan, you can accomplish your goals." (in Malik-Khan, 2011). Ever mindful of the impact of parental guidance upon her life, Dayle envisions a holistic Aboriginal education in which the elders play a vital role helping children to maintain a positive identity by gaining greater knowledge and appreciation of their roots: "Our schools need parents and community involved to support children." (in Athabasca Tribal Council, 2009).

Other women occupying leadership positions in Fort McKay have similar stories to share about the powerful influence of elder mentors on the paths they have taken. One of them is Patricia Flett, community development coordinator at Fort McKay Industry Relations Corporation, a Band agency that works with the area's industry on issues such as air monitoring and land use. Pat presents heartfelt description of the kind of sage her grandmother was: "My grandmother believed in people and she gave them opportunity. And she shared everything - her knowledge, her strengths, . . . her faith. She was a huge mentor and friend." One aspect of her grandmother's character, which has largely shaped Pat's outlook on life, was the conviction that "nothing is too hard, [and] limitations are what you put in your way." Pat recalls with equal fondness her father's motto - simple but profound: "Get involved. Do your part. Work is good for you." It is their teachings, she says, that have inspired her to dedicate herself to the betterment of her community, seeing challenges as opportunities to make a meaningful contribution.

In the same vein, Sheila Bouchier, the owner and operator of a Fort McKay janitorial company, relates her success in running an independent business to the lessons she has learned from her grandmother and her aunt. By continuously assuring her that she was clever and by teaching her, through their example rather than words, that it is necessary to work for what you want, they helped her develop solid self-esteem along with diligence, determination, honesty and optimism - all of which have proved indispensable for building and maintaining a good business reputation.

## ***Stubborn Resilience***

When talking about the virtues taught to them by their elders, the women of Fort McKay commonly allude to perseverance and adaptability - "having the passion to succeed" and "learning how to survive in a world that is so complex"<sup>4</sup> - qualities that are key to fostering resilience. It should therefore come as no surprise that Sandra Stevens, manager of the Fort McKay Business Incubator,

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<sup>3</sup> Although not Aboriginal himself, Rod Hyde has been championing the preservation of Fort McKay's indigenous heritage since he settled here in the 1970s. For example, shortly after his arrival Hyde led a project that sought to bring Fort McKay youth together to write down traditional stories passed on by their mothers and grandmothers. The project resulted in a book-length collection, *Stories my granny told me* (1980), and took on a new life in 2007, when these tales were reenacted by the next generation of Aboriginal kids at the Fort McKay Theatre Camp and InterPLAY Visual and Performing Arts Festival in Fort McMurray (InterPLAY Festival, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> These expressions come from Peggy Lacorde, Executive Assistant to Fort McKay Chief and Council.

views resilience as a signature trait of the women whom she assists in making the leap into entrepreneurship:

Any challenges they encounter, they'll plow through them or go around them . . . In other communities - whether they are Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal—you don't see that passion or that strength of purpose as I see in McKay. . . It's not all women in McKay, but it's a large majority of the women in McKay [who are like this]. And I honestly believe: that's where their success comes from.

Nor are we surprised to hear Sandra say that she knew the Incubator would be successful even before her first day on the job. “We had people who heard we were starting up come in and ask us to help them, even before we were ready,” she remembers (in Semeniuk, 2010). Launched as recently as June 2009, the Incubator has already hatched 14 local businesses by helping Aboriginal entrepreneurs master the business fundamentals necessary for building effective relationships with the oil sands sector (Fort McKay Group of Companies, 2010).

Dayle Hyde echoes Stevens' opinion when she talks about her mother's tough-minded and persistent advocacy for the community as it struggled to assert its rights under Treaty 8: “My mom used to say you need guts of steel to be a chief - she was fearless.” (in Malik-Khan, 2011). Yet Dayle also stresses that her mother balanced this toughness of spirit with the readiness to move with the changes and the genuine concern she had for her people as she was leading them from their age-old subsistence lifestyle into the unknown realm of a wage economy driven by the arrival of an oil sands colossus: “She was very strong-willed and forceful, but also so caring and so thoughtful to other people's feelings. She was a really complex person.”

Likewise, Sheila Bouchier fondly remembers her auntie's saying, “You've got to be stubborn - to a point,” as a beacon that helped her sail through tough times. The way Sheila sees it, stubbornness can be a virtue insofar as it empowers you to tackle every challenge that comes your way. The important thing is “how you use it,” she points out, highlighting the value of being flexible - another observation attesting to resilience that is exhibited by many women of Fort McKay.

## *Acting on Ideas*

Each of the women interviewed for this case study emphasized the importance of being true to one's self - “knowing what makes you tick and striving for it,” as Pat Flett explains. Sheila Bouchier, notwithstanding her firm belief that women have to work “ten times harder to compete in [this] man's world,” took the plunge to fulfill her dream of starting her own business. And she knows very well it would never have happened if it were not for the strong women she had grown up with, especially her aunt Viola, with whom she moved in at 12 years of age. “My auntie always said I could do better,” Sheila recalls. “And even though she didn't come out and say it by word, she showed me through taking me under her wing what it's like to live in a home that's not abusive. It helped out a lot. My self-esteem came up as I started growing into a young lady.”

Another thing that inspired her, Sheila adds, was that she wanted to set an example for her daughter, a desire that came from observing all too often that “people have every excuse not to, but not one excuse to, do what they want.”

Pat Flett believes very strongly that one must live intentionally, articulating and pursuing one's dreams:

Knowing what makes you tick is important, because then you'll strive for it. The world is full of opportunities and you can do anything out there, but you've got to pick what your interest is. You can't do everything, but you can do a part of it. You do make a difference as a person. One person can make a huge difference. What part do you want to get involved in?

Her own path provides a vivid example of how one can forge a meaningful life by putting one's many dreams into action. It will suffice here just to mention the various institutions Pat was involved with in Fort Chipewyan (where she was born and lived before coming to work in Fort McKay): Nunee Health Authority, Historical Society, Youth Justice Circle, Anglican Church Lay Readers, Preschool, Volunteer Fire Department, and Métis Local. Not surprisingly, her catchphrases are: "If it can be done, we can do it. If we can dream it, we can have it."

For McDonald-Hyde's younger sister, Cecilia Fitzpatrick, the decision to quit her job at an oil industry firm and get into the thick of her community's issues as Fort McKay's environmental coordinator and band councillor was the fulfillment of a longtime aspiration to continue the path of Dorothy and their father, who had been at the helm of Fort McKay First Nation as Hereditary Chief for 27 years until his passing in 1976. While acknowledging the substantial economic benefits that the people of Fort McKay were deriving from oil sands development, she was deeply concerned about the severity of its environmental and human impacts:

When you ask the elders, 'What do you miss most about living out on the land?', you see a blank look in their eyes. It is everything: the trapping, the fishing, the talking to each other, the tea dances that we had together, the visiting that we used to do. It is everything. People don't do that anymore. Everything is lost.

However, Cecilia was not interested in dwelling on how her people can survive without a close-knit community embedded in the fabric of intimate, binding relationships with the land. As far as she was concerned, the vital question was, "How do we get it back?"

The strategy she put forth was to make the industry players work collaboratively with the Indigenous community of Fort McKay, and its elders in particular, in developing mitigation programs and reclamation designs in keeping with traditional knowledge and values for all ongoing and proposed mining projects in the area. Thanks in no small part to her efforts, Fort McKay First Nation has adopted an environmental restoration model focusing on "cultural keystone species" - plants and animals known to have shaped the cultural identity of the Indigenous community in a major way, as reflected in the fundamental roles they play as a staple food, material, or medicine, as well as their prominence in traditional ceremonies and spiritual practices (Garibaldi, 2009).

By providing reclamation targets that are meaningful to the Indigenous community, this innovative approach seeks to reinforce its cultural integrity in addition to restoring the ecological functionality of its ancestral land. As a key step towards this goal, Fort McKay has established an Elder Advisory Group for each of the regional industry players. These groups, typically comprised of 8 to 10 elders whose trapline areas overlap or lie close to the lease sites, meet with industry rep-

representatives on a regular basis to discuss the successes and challenges of current reclamation efforts with regard to the cultural keystone species.

It is easy to see why Cecilia Fitzpatrick considers the continuous dialogue on reclamation issues between her community and the industry as the major achievement during her work as Fort McKay's Environmental Coordinator. When asked about what prompted her to initiate this process, she simply says, "I guess it was a calling. This was what I had to do."

## ***Commitment to Place***

Many of Fort McKay's women leaders and activists had to leave their community for a certain period in pursuit of education or work opportunities. However, at some point in their lives, each felt the urge to return to the land of their people - and followed that urge.

Dorothy McDonald-Hyde left Fort McKay to attend high school in Edmonton. As related by her daughter Dayle, "It was really hard for her to leave the community. . . but I think that being sent away to school and being told [by my grandfather] that that was something she just had to do. . . so that she could come back and help her community - that's where she drew her strength." Inspired by love for her people, she returned to help them go through a critical juncture in Fort McKay's history, always staying true to her father's wish - "keep our pride and negotiate with industry [to] get the best of both worlds" (in Steele, 2005).

Cecilia Fitzpatrick had a homecoming story of her own. After marrying a Newfoundlander she settled in Fort McMurray, raising their children and eventually getting a job as a heavy equipment operator at Syncrude. As the years went by, the combined demands of home and work started to take a toll on her health: "Raising four boys and doing shift work driving trucks was really hard, and I was not that young anymore." And on top of that, "my brother was always phoning me and saying: 'It is time for you to work for your people.'" It was his persistent urging, says Cecilia that ultimately prompted her to turn her gaze back to Fort McKay. She had long held the dream of following in the footsteps of her father and her older sister Dorothy; her brother's words rekindled that dream. By taking on the duties of environmental coordinator for Fort McKay First Nation, Cecilia pledged to work towards implementing her father's teachings, which she always remembered.

My father would tell you that our body is like the earth. We need a heart to live. And he would tell you that the muskeg is your heart, and that the mountains are your brain, and that the creeks and rivers are your blood vessels. . . . And he would say: because of that, you have to look after the land. And if you will not look after it, your heart will stop. (Fitzpatrick, 2004).

Cecilia came back home at a moment when her people desperately needed someone with a deep passion for their land and a vision to lead the fight for protecting its spirit. She had both.

## *The Mixed Blessings of Oil Sands Development*

Cecilia Fitzpatrick remembers that in her childhood days, traveling between her community and the nearest town, Fort McMurray, was only possible by boat on the Athabasca River in the summer or by dog sled in the winter. Unspoiled muskeg forests that had sustained the people of Fort McKay for millennia began at their back doors and stretched for miles and miles in every direction.

Today, their traditional hunting, trapping and plant gathering areas are all but gone. As one reporter recently stated, Fort McKay “feels like a bull’s-eye on a dartboard because it’s surrounded on all sides by oil sands development” (Steele, 2006).

This tiny First Nation community now finds itself at the centre of what is arguably the largest industrial project in human history. Underlying an area of about 140,000 square kilometres, Alberta’s oil sands are estimated to contain about 170 billion barrels of oil that are economically recoverable at 2006 prices - more oil than that of Kuwait and Russia combined. In fact, only Saudi Arabia and Venezuela possess larger proven reserves of crude oil (Alberta Energy, 2011). The exploitation of these vast reserves has already assumed a prominent role in Canada’s economy: a recent study by the Canadian Energy Research Institute found that Alberta’s oil sands yielded about 1.7 million barrels of crude bitumen per day and supported some 75,000 jobs across Canada in 2010. According to this study, the projected expansion of the oil sands sector over the next 25 years will firmly establish it as Canada’s key economic driver. It is anticipated that oil sands production will reach 4.9 billion barrels a day and the number of jobs in Canada both directly and indirectly related to oil sands will grow to over 900,000 by 2035. The total GDP impact of oil sands investment and operations for Canada over this 25-year period is estimated at \$2.1 trillion (Honarvar, Rozhon, Millington, Walden, Murillo, and Walden, 2011).

For the community of Fort McKay, the economic benefits of engagement with the oil sands industry are many and profound. The story of the Fort McKay Group of Companies is a case in point. From its humble janitorial beginnings<sup>5</sup>, it has grown into a powerhouse of seven businesses, most of them service-oriented, that together own \$150-million worth in capital assets, including an industrial park and a fleet of passenger vehicles, trucks and heavy equipment (Fort McKay Group of Companies, 2010). Boasting annual revenues in excess of \$100 million (Government of Alberta, 2011), the Fort McKay Group of Companies is one of the most successful First Nation-owned business ventures in Canada.

In 2010, the Group employed 472 people, 33% of whom were Aboriginal. Sixty-four employees (13% of the Group’s workforce) were from Fort McKay First Nation (Fort McKay Group of Companies, 2010), which roughly corresponds to a quarter of its employable population. Many Fort McKay residents who are not employed with the Group run their own businesses. Community members with a business idea can get guidance, mentoring, and office space from the Fort McKay Business Incubator (see above). A joint venture between Fort McKay First Nation and Suncor Energy aimed to help local entrepreneurs develop their ideas into sustainable businesses, it is the only on-reserve incubator in Canada.

Thanks to these economic development engines, Fort McKay’s unemployment levels are less than 5% (Kunzig, 2009). “Everyone that wants to work has a job,” says Chief Jim Boucher (in Se-

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<sup>5</sup> In 1986, its first year of operations, the Group earned \$50,000 in revenues (Fort McKay First Nation, 2005).

meniuk, 2010). And this is just one of the many social benefits related to oil sands development. Fort McKay First Nation has a hundred new three-bedroom houses that the community rents to its members for far less than market rates. It has a brand new facility that contains the daycare centre for children and Elders Centre. And while the Band's plan of building a new K-12 school is yet to be fulfilled, it has a state-of-the-art eLearning Centre (created jointly with Shell Canada), an online school providing Fort McKay's youth the opportunity to obtain their high school qualifications within the confines of their community under the Alberta Distance Learning Program (Fort McKay First Nation, 2011).

Yet these very impressive socioeconomic benefits and entrepreneurial opportunities related to oil sands development are accompanied by severe environmental deterioration, the full impact of which on the area's Aboriginal communities is yet to be determined. There is probably no other place where the cumulative impacts of oil sands development have been as profound as in Fort McKay. The most observable environmental effect of oil sands is the loss of huge tracts of boreal forest. With a footprint of 650 km<sup>2</sup> in 2008 (Schindler, 2010), most of the traplines used by generations of Fort McKay people for food and furs have either been wiped out or are no longer accessible. The impact on forest coverage is expected to rise by almost 20 times – or 11,300 km<sup>2</sup> – dramatically affecting wildlife and other natural resources. “We are at ground zero,” says band councillor Mike Orr. “Fort McKay people are directly affected by industry from all directions more than any other group” (in Fenton, 2010). The magnitude of the issues requires developing effective mitigation strategies, and Fort McKay First Nation has already taken a number of important steps in that direction.

One example is the “Healing the Earth Strategy,” issued by Fort McKay Industry Relations Corporation in 2004, which articulates environmental mitigation practices that the community expects the industry to adopt. The strategy has four key elements: retention (protecting key natural areas and life-sustaining resources); reclamation (returning disturbed areas to a state in which they can support viable populations of traditionally important plants and animals; improvement (developing environmentally benign technologies); and offset (setting aside existing natural areas to counteract the deterioration or loss of land due to development pressures). The strategy provides specific targets regarding air, land, water, wildlife and human health. (Fort McKay Industry Relations Corporation, 2004)

Another example is the cultural keystone species model mentioned earlier. Its specific contribution to mitigating the impact of the oil sands industry on Aboriginal culture encompasses traditional values and helps community members to maintain spiritual connection with areas undergoing lengthy reclamation process. This will extend the lives of many people in the community, providing strong motivation for community participation in reclamation activities.

These examples show that community leaders in Fort McKay realize the need for bringing the working relationships they have built with the industry to a new level. The collaborative arena should be expanded to include concerted land stewardship efforts. “Greater inclusion of the people of Fort McKay . . . to regulate and monitor on a First Nations environmental stewardship model is required,” says Mike Orr (in Fenton, 2010). Cecilia Fitzpatrick has a similar vision:

Our people need to be involved. We all need to have a say in how we negotiate with the industry. Right now our land is being destroyed faster than we can reclaim it. We should talk to our people about how we should be reclaiming the land. Let's have scientists talk

to our elders and integrate their knowledge with western science, and let's get to work and make it better. That's one of my dreams.

## Conclusion: Looking Ahead

Fort McKay has faced big challenges over the past century and has had to make some hard decisions about how to sustain itself into the future. Thanks in no small part to the wisdom and energy of its women who are committed to the well-being of their families and the community, Fort McKay Band has been actively searching for ways to harness the opportunities presented by the oil sands industry. Involvement with the industry has provided a financially secure future for upcoming generations of Fort McKay people, as well as helping to build a renewed sense of self-reliance within the community.

On the other hand, the community's ancestral lands are fast deteriorating, which poses a severe threat to the cultural traditions inextricably linked to these lands. This, however, would have been an inevitable risk associated with industrial development even if Fort McKay had opted not to tie its economic future to the oil sands industry. The development of the Athabasca oil sands would have gone on around its people, without them. Having made the decision to engage with the industry, Fort McKay First Nation can indeed take central role in stewarding the land on which they live.

Cecilia Fitzpatrick believes that the people of Fort McKay will need great leadership to maintain their spiritual connection to the land and their cultural identity in the whirlwind of unprecedented environmental changes they are currently facing. She also believes that the women of Fort McKay have a critical role to play. "We as women, and native women especially, have so much to battle to get ahead," she explains, "and that's what makes us capable of dealing with whatever comes." These words bring to mind Sandra Stevens' remark about the leadership strength she finds in many women of Fort McKay: "I think its secret ingredient is this: whatever the challenges are, they just plow right through them."

There is hope that women leaders and activists of Fort McKay will be able to engage their fellow community members in an earnest endeavour to restore their native land in accordance with the knowledge and values of their elders—and thereby lay the foundation for recreating their culture in the face of external pressures.



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