

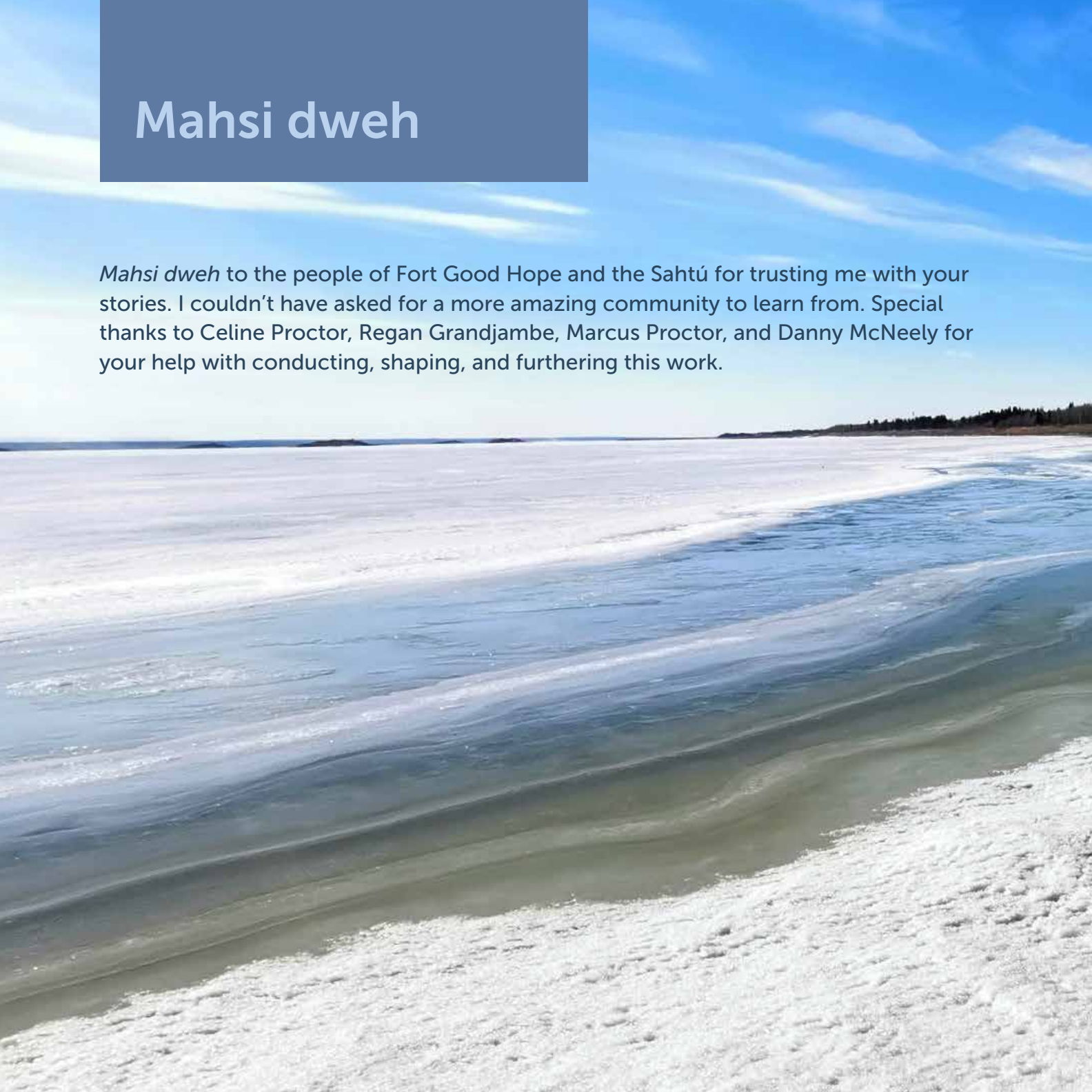
Sahtú Dene & Métis Engagement in the Closure and Reclamation of the Norman Wells Oilfield

Research conducted by Annie King
Research supervised by Dr. Tristan Pearce, Paul Dixon and Dr. Sinead Earley

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Mahsi dweh

Mahsi dweh to the people of Fort Good Hope and the Sahtú for trusting me with your stories. I couldn't have asked for a more amazing community to learn from. Special thanks to Celine Proctor, Regan Grandjambe, Marcus Proctor, and Danny McNeely for your help with conducting, shaping, and furthering this work.





Introduction

The Norman Wells Oilfield is in the Sahtú region of the Northwest Territories, Canada. After operating for over a century, Imperial Oil is currently planning for the oilfield's closure and reclamation.

Most current research views the remediation of mines and oilfields as a technical issue that can be addressed with biological, engineering, and chemical solutions. However, there is very little research about the social, cultural, economic, and spiritual aspects of oil and gas remediation. This research uses qualitative methods to examine the processes of engagement and roles of Sahtú Dene and Métis knowledge and perspectives for their traditional territory as the reclamation and closure of the Norman Wells Oilfield proceeds.



Objectives

This booklet has two objectives:

1

Examine the structures and processes for how Sahtú Dene and Métis have been engaged in the Norman Wells Oilfield Development reclamation and closure.

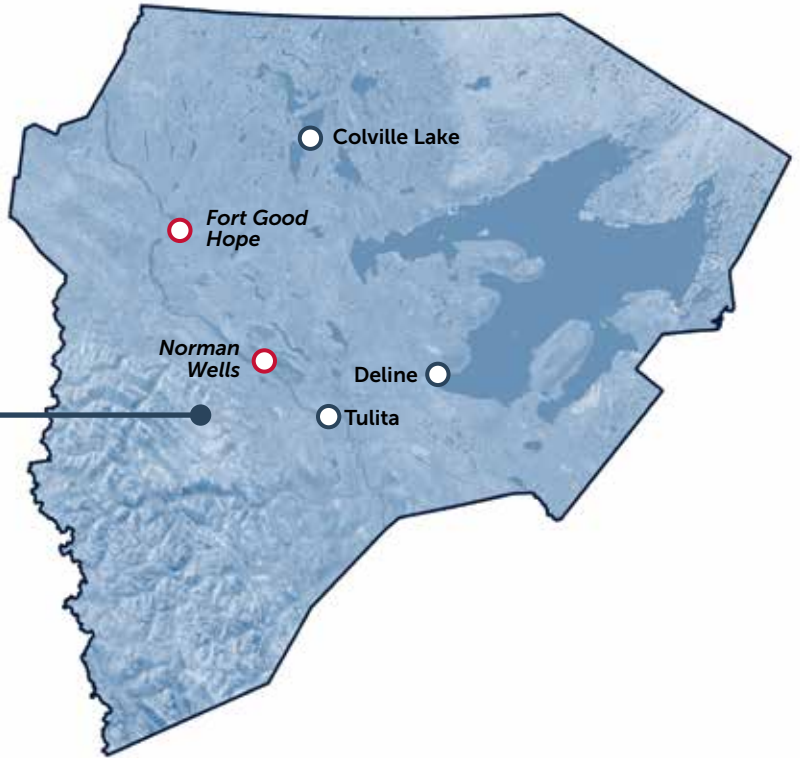
2

Identify opportunities for the meaningful involvement of Sahtú Dene and Métis in the closure, remediation, and reclamation of the Norman Wells Oilfield.

Background

The Sahtú people are a Dene First Nations and Métis people in the Northwest Territories spread across five communities totaling approximately 2,600 people. The Sahtú people have lived in the Northwest Territories since time immemorial. In 1921, petroleum company Imperial Oil began extracting oil in Sahtú territory. Sahtú people had no influence in the oilfield's construction or operation. Following the Berger Inquiry in the 1970's, the Sahtú Dene and Métis formalized a Comprehensive Land Claim agreement with the federal government. This agreement is part of a larger shift toward returning environmental decision-making power to Indigenous peoples in Canada.

The oilfield underwent expansion in 1985. In 1994, the local Sahtú Dene & Métis people created an entirely new legislative framework for resource extraction in the region: the Sahtú Dene & Métis Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement (SDMCLCA). Signing the SDMCLCA changed the way extractive industry could operate on Sahtú land. The SDMCLCA established a new process for consultation & engagement in environmental decision-making, which has not yet been tested against a closure as big as the Norman Wells Oilfield.



Methods



Annie King (university researcher) worked with local Elder Celine Proctor, and students Regan Grandjambe and Marcus Grandjambe, to conduct 41 semi-structured interviews in Fort Good Hope. Interviewees ranged in age from 24-84. Interviews covered topics including past experiences with Imperial Oil and other resource extraction companies, people's engagement with the upcoming Norman Wells closure in particular, their perception of these experiences, and their requests and preferences for future engagement. Discussions often centered around the impact that the Norman Wells Oilfield has had on the community. Annie also reviewed past communication documents in the online Sahtú Land and Water Board repository, and documents in an onsite library maintained by the Sahtú Land Use Planning Board.

Table 1 - Interviewee Demographics for Semi-structured Interviews in Fort Good Hope

	18-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	80+	Total
Male	1	2	2	4	5	2	4	20
Female	3	7	2	4	2	1	2	21
Total	4	9	4	8	7	3	6	41

The Findings

The findings reveal that past engagement and consultation from Imperial Oil with the Sahtú people has been culturally inappropriate. This has resulted in a loss of trust, violation of Dene principles of reciprocity, and overall ineffective communication.



A scenic winter landscape featuring snow-covered mountains in the background and a dense forest of evergreen trees in the foreground. The sky is clear and blue. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

Trust

Reciprocity

Cultural Appropriateness

Past Engagement

Trust

Problems with engagement has led to Sahtú people's loss of trust in Imperial Oil. This is a pervasive problem in Fort Good Hope, where some have shared that broken trust is a result of a historical pattern of broken promises.

Imperial Oil's perceived lack of meaningful engagement over the past 100 years, combined with the conduct of other natural resource extraction companies operating in the Sahtú region, and placed within the greater ongoing Canadian colonial context, has degraded Sahtú people's trust of resource extraction companies over time. Conversations with community revealed that some do not believe that trust can ever be rebuilt, while others are cautiously optimistic that if Imperial Oil engages with Sahtú people well, and follows through on their promises, that the process of restoring trust may begin.



"I can't trust them. I wear that in the back of my mind all the time when dealing with them. Be good to them, but don't trust them."

EDWIN ERUTSE



Reciprocity

The ideal of reciprocity is highly valued in Dene communities. Reciprocity governs the way that the Dene and Métis people of the Sahtú hunt animals, how they treat animals once they have been hunted, and how they treat one another and the environment. According to interview respondents, Imperial Oil has violated the principal of reciprocity with the environment, and with Sahtú people.

Interview respondents believe that Imperial has gained more from the relationship than Sahtú people, and the Sahtú people have experienced harm.

Environmental degradation

Sahtú people have seen a decline in the population of an important species: the herring. Imperial Oil denies a connection between their activities and the decline of the species. That said, people in Fort Good Hope do not necessarily think that the herring population has declined because of contamination from oil. Rather, many believe that the herring have disappeared because Imperial Oil's operations have violated Sahtú principles of reciprocity with the environment.







Land rights to the NWPA

The Norman Wells Proven Area Agreement (NWPAA) was signed in 1944 between the Canadian Federal Government and Imperial Oil. The NWPAA gives Imperial Oil the exclusive right to extract the petroleum and natural gas of the Norman Wells Oilfield. The agreement gives a two-thirds ownership interest in the Norman Wells Oilfield to Imperial Oil. The federal government, not the Sahtú, receives the other one-third ownership interest in gross production from the field. After remediation, the rights to this land will return to the Sahtú people, but in the meantime, the land rights and rights to profit have mostly remained in the hands of Imperial Oil and the Federal government.



Financial costs/benefits

Imperial oil has benefitted considerably from its operations at Norman Wells. In recent years, they have made hundreds of millions of dollars in profit. While one-third of profits are shared with the Federal Government of Canada, the Sahtú does not receive royalties or payments for the oil extracted from their territory.

The Sahtú people benefit from Imperial Oil's financial contributions to their communities. The company claims that they donate \$100,000 to \$200,000 to the Sahtú every year (A Century of Production, n.d.). They have donated houses, and in recent years have funded projects like youth conferences, food pantries, and non-profits in the Sahtú region. The impact of these contributions has been debated in public hearings, and some have pointed out that the donations' significance is small compared to the company's earnings year-after-year.

Employment

Imperial Oil identifies employment and training as outcomes of their operations that benefit the Sahtú. While some Sahtú people believe employment to be Imperial Oil's only benefit to the Sahtú, many others recognize that jobs and training can create positive impacts on the economy. That said, even respondents who recognized the benefit of employment added that very few Sahtú people work for Imperial Oil.



Overall

The principle of reciprocity cannot be looked at simply as a list of costs and benefits without putting it in the context of the relationships between all involved, nor can this table capture the nuances of the relationship between Imperial Oil and the Sahtú. Additionally, not all Sahtú people experience these costs and benefits equally. That said, the table below gives a picture of how unequal the experience of oil extraction at Norman Wells is for all involved.

Table 2 - Cost-Benefit Comparison table of Imperial Oil and Sahtú People

	COST	BENEFIT
Imperial Oil	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- \$100,000 - \$200,000/year directly- Regulatory costs- Salaries of employees- Costs of performing engagement activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- \$93 million/year- Subsurface and surface rights
Sahtú	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Displacement of families- Subsurface and surface rights- Environmental change, affecting way of life and tradition	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Employment (though there are issues)- Training- \$100,000-\$200,000/year in financial support

Cultural appropriateness

Relationship building

For Sahtú Dene and Métis people, relationships and relationship-building are essential. Relationships with individuals are just as important, if not more so than relationships with Imperial Oil as a whole, or as a company. The company has had multiple representatives for the region throughout the years: “We’re the same, they cycle through,” said one respondent. This lack of continuity is an issue: when new ambassadors are hired to represent Imperial, the continuity of developing a relationship with an individual is interrupted, and the community must start over. One respondent explained, “the community has a longer memory than each new boss,” and that Imperial’s “management feels like the past is less important.” Further, the lack of continuity leads to challenges in trying to “evolve the conversation,” finding solutions, asking questions and receiving answers.”



**“How do you know us without visiting us?
You don’t know us because you’re strangers
on our land. Until I’ve been on the land with
you, I don’t know you.”**

BUDDY GULLY





Format

When Imperial Oil has meetings with the public in Fort Good Hope, those meetings are usually held in the band hall, which serves as a community gathering space. Representatives of Imperial Oil will often arrive on a flight in the morning, have meetings with leaders during the morning, spend the afternoon or evening having a meeting in the band hall, and then leave that night, or the next morning. As for format, Imperial pays for a community feast, then gives a presentation, and fields questions from attendees. While no interviewees expressed any issues with this, there are some potential issues with the format.

Speaking for others...

One issue is the that many people in Fort Good Hope do not like to speak on behalf of others. People often respond to questions with answers with "I can't speak for anyone else, but I think..." or "I can't say what others want, but what I want is..." Even community leaders often include these phrases before they share an opinion.

Speaking in front of others...

Another issue is that Sahtú Dene people, like many other Northern Indigenous groups, are not an outspoken people. For a Sahtú person to speak up at a meeting with Imperial Oil, especially in the public format those meetings usually take, requires that Sahtú people set aside their cultural and social norms to become outspoken advocates for their land.

Elders...

Elders' life experience makes them experts on many subjects, so the community will often defer to Elders at meetings. When outside parties come to do engagement and consultation, Elders will often dominate in conversation. Though they have extensive life experience and many stories to tell, their perspectives are not always shared by the whole community. As well, Elders share lessons and opinions in the form of stories, and sometimes outsiders without cultural context miss the stories' meanings.



Past engagement

Frequency and target

As far as which community receives the most engagement, between 2015 and 2021, Norman Wells saw the most, at 28 instances. Tulita saw 18 engagements in the same period, followed by Fort Good Hope at 17. Déliné was engaged 4 times in that period, and Colville Lake 3 times.

Leaders are the most-engaged group by Imperial Oil across the Sahtú region and within Fort Good Hope. Out of 17 engagements recorded by Imperial Oil between 2015 and 2021, only 6 were publicly accessible meetings. Two of those were Chapter 9 meetings, which are required annually by Chapter 9 of the SDMCLCA.

Figure 1 - Mode of Engagement 2015-2021, Sahtú-wide

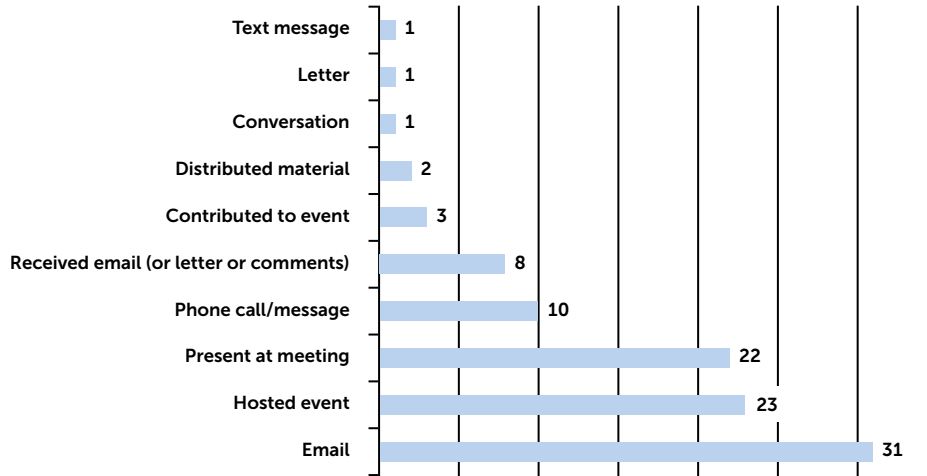
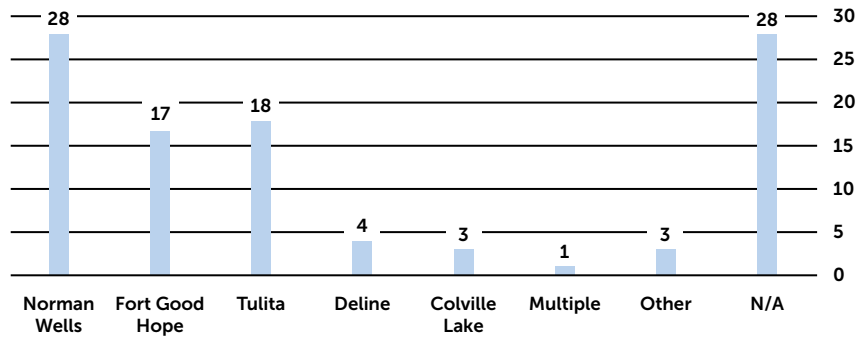


Figure 2 - Number of Engagements by Community, 2015-2021

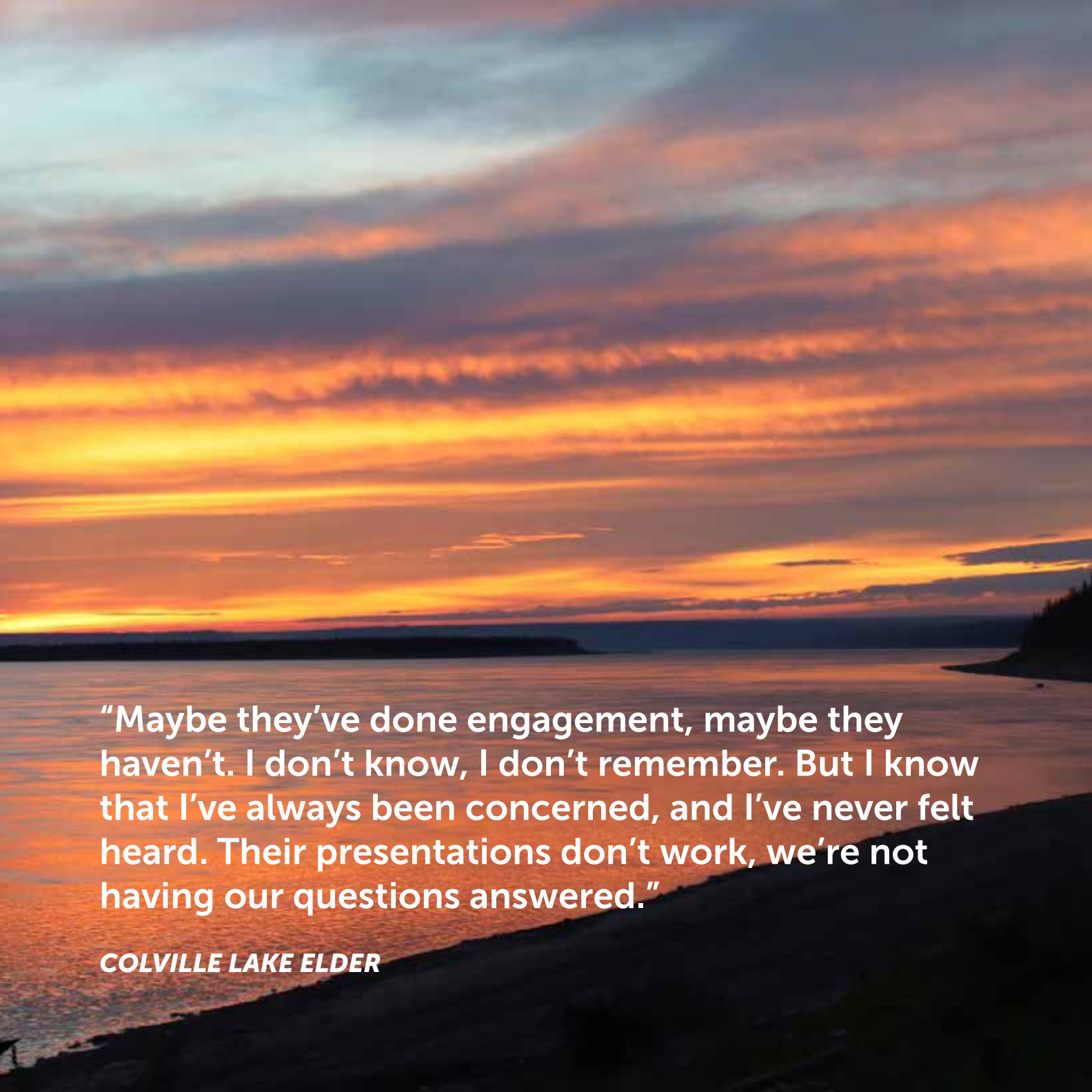


Clarity

Community members find many of the past presentations by Imperial difficult to understand. In many meetings, information is shared in the form of a slideshow with a question period afterward. The information is often very technical. One community member told me he believes Imperial makes their presentation materials intentionally difficult to understand. He reasoned that this is done so that people are unable to fully grasp the issues and advocate for themselves.

Without enough money to hire highly trained people to get through large amounts of technical information, volume of information from Imperial Oil at presentations and in reports can quickly become overwhelming make it difficult for leaders and regulators to respond.



A photograph of a sunset over a large body of water. The sky is filled with horizontal bands of orange, yellow, and blue, with some darker clouds. The water reflects the colors of the sky. In the foreground, there is a dark, silhouetted shoreline with some trees on the right side.

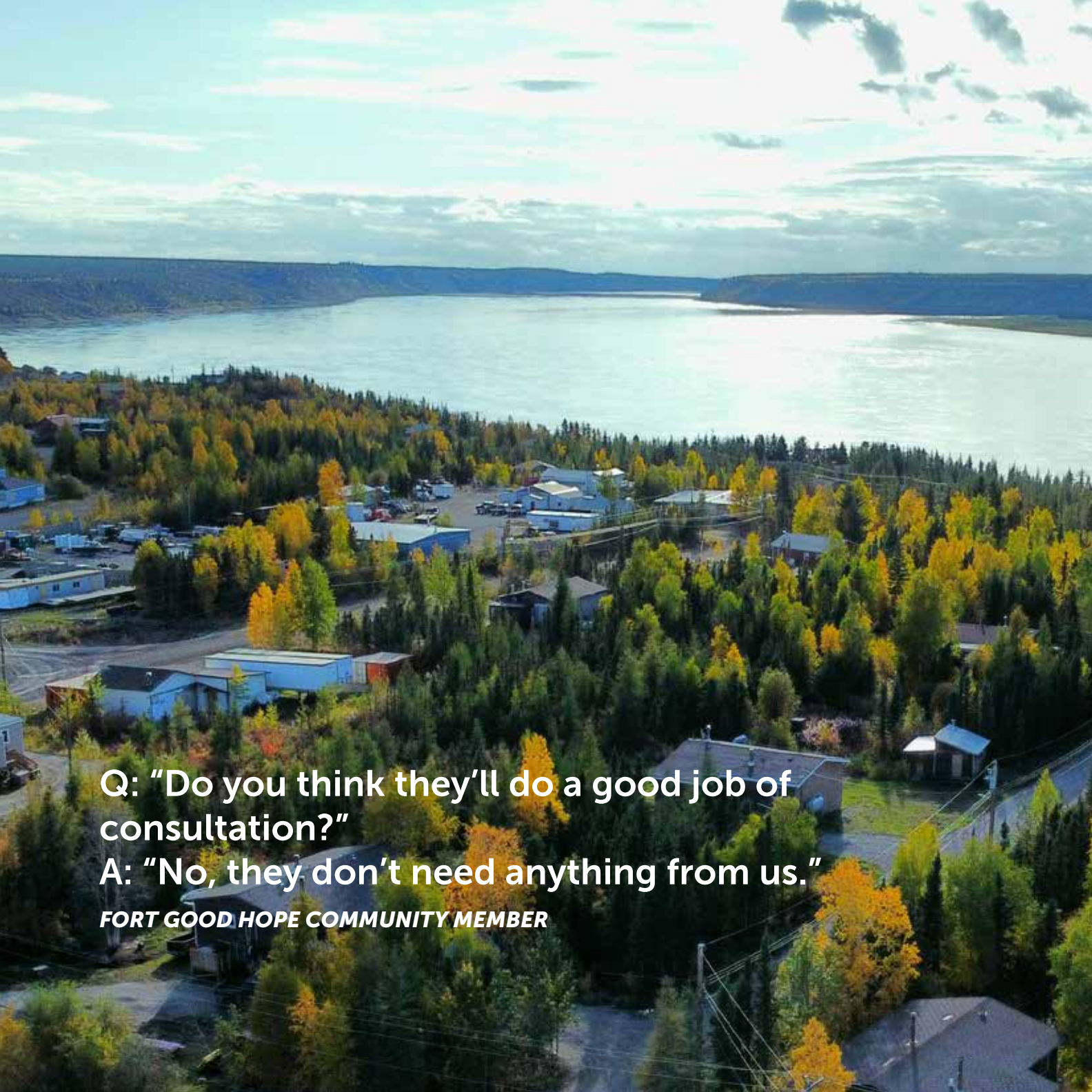
“Maybe they’ve done engagement, maybe they haven’t. I don’t know, I don’t remember. But I know that I’ve always been concerned, and I’ve never felt heard. Their presentations don’t work, we’re not having our questions answered.”

COLVILLE LAKE ELDER

Communication

Communication from Imperial Oil is another issue for people in Fort Good Hope. One interviewee told me that Imperial Oil is “exceptionally poor” at communications. She continued, “They’re a big company. They should come here and update us! There are so many ways! Facebook, social media, local radio, posters on our bulletin boards...” but that Imperial was not making an effort to inform the public of what was happening. She thought that if engagement was important to Imperial, they would do it.





Q: "Do you think they'll do a good job of consultation?"

A: "No, they don't need anything from us."

FORT GOOD HOPE COMMUNITY MEMBER



Cooperation

Fort Good Hope residents interviewed did not feel that Imperial Oil had a collaborative style of consultation. Rather, they felt that Imperial Oil arrived in the community with decisions already made, and consultation was just a way for Imperial Oil to gain approval for their ideas. Many expressed hope that the relationship could become more cooperative.



“When they show up, they’ve already got a plan of what they’re going to do, how they’re going to solve this. Once they come up with that solution and I see it, I’m not happy. Are you even open to solutions, to another way?”

EDWIN ERUTSE

Pathways Forward

Build Cultural Understanding

Effective engagement with the Sahtú people requires an approach deeply rooted in their cultural context. Over the course of a century Imperial Oil has not bridged the cultural gap between their Euro-Canadian perspective and the Sahtú Dene worldview.

One possible solution is to require cultural education for all Imperial Oil employees involved in the closure and reclamation process, or to recommend best practices. However, while having a set of best practices for engaging with the Sahtú Dene and Métis people might seem helpful, it does not fully address the issue. Building genuine relationships and engaging in good faith are essential and cannot be replaced by best practices or cultural teachings alone.

As Elders and other Dene and Métis people share stories to convey their perspectives to Imperial Oil, those stories need require a nuanced understanding of Dene culture for proper interpretation and appreciation. Therefore, Imperial Oil must invest in understanding Dene culture and laws to engage meaningfully with the community. Mere presentation of scientific evidence falls short without this essential cultural context.





Contribute to Reconciliation

To achieve reconciliation in the remediation process, Imperial Oil needs to commit to a long-term effort of building a deeper cultural understanding to engage effectively with the Sahtú people. Over time, this engagement can help Imperial Oil gain insight into the Sahtú people's needs and aspirations. Without this foundation of mutual cultural understanding, Imperial Oil runs the risk of continuing harmful colonial practices and relationships.

With this improved understanding, Imperial Oil has the potential to contribute to reconciliation by facilitating the healing of the Sahtú people in harmony with the land and by supporting their ability to fully utilize the benefits of the land claim.

The harm inflicted on the environment and the disruption of traditional activities, such as fishing, have had adverse effects on the Sahtú people and their cultural identity. Imperial Oil needs to assess collaborate with the Sahtú people to determine if the harm they have caused can ever be compensated for. It's likely that full compensation is not possible, so Imperial Oil should shift its focus toward supporting the healing and future development of the Sahtú community to contribute to reconciliation.

Reconciliation and consultation should be a joint effort, designed and agreed upon together with the Sahtú people, with a strong emphasis on addressing Indigenous needs and aspirations.



Acknowledgments

This research was conducted by Annie King¹ with the community of Fort Good Hope under the supervision of Dr. Tristan Pearce², Paul Dixon³ and Dr. Sinead Earley⁴. This research was financially supported by the Sahtu Land and Water Board, the Social Science and Humanities Research Council, University of Northern British Columbia's Research Project Award, and Canada Research Chair Dr. Tristan Pearce.

*All photos courtesy of Paul Dixon and Annie King.
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