

Metis Harvesting in Alberta: Violence, Racism and Resistance

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LAST MONTH'S utterly devastating murders of Jake Sansom and Morris Cardinal—two Metis hunters trying to get on the land to feed their families in this time of uncertainty—has led me to reflect on my own experiences as a Metis hunter and some of the challenges more generally for Indigenous hunters.

This is not a reflection on this specific act of violence, but rather, it is meant to consider the atmosphere under which Metis hunters currently live and work. This may have more and more relevance as our collective self-isolation goes on and the hunting and gathering seasons ramp up over the coming months.

HUNTING FROM THE MARGINS

I'm a recognized Metis harvester in the province of Alberta. I've had my harvester status for a number of years now and I'm an active moose, duck, goose, hunter and medicinal forager. I'm fortunate that I grew up with a family that placed an onus on our connection to land and the teachings that go along with that. I'm fortunate that I have connections with Elders and Knowledge Keepers throughout Cree and Metis communities that have helped me learn and develop a harvesters skill set that I can one day pass down to future generations. Most importantly, I am fortunate that I have the financial means to be able to access harvesting areas from an urban environment.

Ten years ago I didn't have the financial freedom that afforded me the ability to be an active harvester. I had just finished a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Alberta. Saddled with student debt, not owning a working vehicle, and definitely not having enough money for a tank of gas or the equipment necessary to get started in harvesting activities, I was stranded on 118th Avenue in Edmonton. I dreamed of being out on the land from the confines of my basement suite. In my final semester of University I received a poetry award for \$1200.00. It was at the same time that I also got a position as an "Aboriginal Intern" with the Government of Alberta. I used the poetry award to purchase a shotgun and a canoe, and my new salary to purchase a blue Chevy Lumina. For the first time since my childhood, I had the opportunity to actively engage in harvesting. This allowed me to stock my freezer and provide much needed sustenance for my grandparents and community.

Urban living never stopped my grandmother from continuing her harvesting practices. On her daily walks around the artificial Beaumaris Lake she would go into people's yards that backed onto the path and take produce from their gardens. When saskatoon berries came into season, she'd take a city bus down to the river valley and walk around filling up 4L ice cream pails on the same trails that her Granny walked as a young lady from the Papaschase community. As far as I know, she was never threatened with trespassing. Nor did Granny talk about any instances of racism while harvesting. But if it had happened, she would have brushed it under the rug, as so many people from her generation tend to do.

THE VIOLENCE OF THE “ISOLATED INCIDENT”

Metis peoples still rely on harvesting as a means to fill the freezers of their families and communities. My Granny harvests, I harvest, and until they were shot dead near Seibert Lake, Jake Sansom and Morris Cardinal harvested. Sansom had recently been laid off from his job and so to prepare for the coming months of economic hardship, went north to hunt some Crown Land with his Uncle Morris.

While the circumstances of their murder is not yet clear, we know there was a confrontation and of the little the RCMP has disclosed, they have **emphasized** that “there is no evidence that the killings were racially motivated.”

This is difficult to accept, considering myself and countless others, including **Kyle Lafreniere**, can attest to the continual and ongoing confrontations with settlers. There is a pattern here and the RCMP’s insistence on the violence as “random” or an “isolated incident” contradicts our experiences as Metis (and certainly First Nation) hunters.

When engaging with settler hunters, I’m told that I’m “lucky” to be hunting, implicitly challenging my “special” rights. This is typically followed by a more explicit and racist tangent on Indigenous people.

Meanwhile I’ll simply nod, maybe try to diffuse the situation with a laugh, and end the conversation as quickly and safely as possible. In rural Alberta, many people carry weapons in their vehicles. And as we saw last month, they aren’t afraid to use them.

The fear that I and others describe, is further justified when considering the common sentiment from the “hunting” community towards Metis and First Nations harvesters. A quick glance at popular **hunting forums** provides all the context needed to understand the racism driving the threats and acts of violence. Stereotypes and misconceptions of Indigenous harvesting practices fuel the hatred. After the cold blooded murders of Jake Sansom and Morris Cardinal, I am genuinely scared to leave Edmonton.

CAN A NEW METIS HARVESTING POLICY HELP?

All of this comes at a time when the Metis harvesting policy is encouraging more Metis hunters to get on the land.

Under the old policy “legal” Metis harvesting in Alberta was limited to those individuals who lived on a Metis Settlement or a recognized Metis community and had an application approved by the provincial government. But the process to become “legal” was very complicated (perhaps intentionally so).

At the outset, there was a complete void of information: nothing available online from the Province and the Metis Nation of Alberta (MNA) was likewise unhelpful. When I finally did receive information on how to apply for harvester status, thanks to the Lac Ste. Anne Metis community, I was overwhelmed by the maze of bureaucracy.

To apply you required a long form birth certificate, family trees and supporting documents showing a connection to a pre-1900 Metis community, and a current community connection to the territory, on top of other requirements. The only reason I was able to provide these documents was because my late Auntie devoted her retirement years to research on our family and ancestors. Metis Peoples have lost these generational historical connections due to colonial interference and policies intended to erase Metis Peoples.

Nonetheless, Metis harvesters who were able to complete the process were limited to a 160 km radius around the community they were approved through. Under this system, there were roughly **1600 approved Metis harvesters**.

Given the challenges, and lobbying from hunters and Metis organizations, a new **Metis Harvesting Policy** in Alberta was introduced on September 1, 2019.

The process for hunters to get “legal” approval has been handed over to the Metis Nation of Alberta, who will administer four specific harvesting areas in the province. These areas have exponentially increased the land that “approved” Metis harvesters can now access.

Since this devolution, the Metis Nation of Alberta has approved 2,070 harvesting applications. Assuming that the 1600 from before were grandfathered into the new policy, that leaves us with roughly 3,700 approved harvesters (by comparison, there were 267,630 fishing licenses sold and 122,085 registered, non-Indigenous, hunters in Alberta).

AN UNCERTAIN HUNT

The irony now, under the current atmosphere of fear for Metis hunters, is that this expansion of Metis hunting rights in the province will be met with hesitation due to the fear of confrontation. Indeed, the new policy will likely drive a reinforcement of the common stereotype in Alberta (but much of the country) that Indigenous Peoples are over-exploiting the land and animals. It probably doesn't need to be said here that the stereotype is a false one meant to protect the interests of settler Albertans.

To us, harvesting is a way to support our families and communities while connecting with ancestors and the land. There are protocols that must be followed to avoid waste and overconsumption.

As the layoffs continue and more people are out of work, it will bring more Metis out to the land. That is what our ancestors have done for generations. It's what we do to support our families and communities. That's what Morris Cardinal and Jake Sansom were doing and what they should still be able to do today.

I'm not sure we can count on the province of Alberta or the RCMP to recognize the challenge Metis (and First Nation) hunters now face. Even if this violence becomes even more of a trend than it already is, we can expect more assertions of the randomness of it all. No, we have to support one another, and refuse to allow fear and settler attitudes to influence our harvesting practices. Now, more than ever, we can't allow colonialism in Alberta to win.