

After a Century of Oil Extraction: Reclaiming the River at Norman Wells

by Annie King

IT'S MY FIRST DAY in Fort Good Hope, and I drive to a camp near the edge of town. I add my borrowed truck to a row of a dozen others, climb out, and then make my way toward a cluster of people. At the centre of camp, Elders are instructing the younger women in a mix of Dene and English, teaching them how to tan moose and caribou hides. The process is intensive: scraping, washing, wringing, stretching, hanging, smoking, rinsing, stitching. It can take weeks, I am told, to tan a single hide, and nobody will finish one this afternoon.

The mood is light and happy. After observing for a while, I follow the sound of laughter from a few yards away, coming from a plywood-and-sheet metal camp kitchen. I shyly poke my head through the door to see a functional kitchen space and a few women preparing food. I sit down at the table, and people stream in and out to snack on scattered plates of fruit, crackers, and cheese. Everyone chats and laughs together. People are receiving me politely, but not necessarily warmly, so I sit quietly and try to absorb everything going on around me.

After a while, the snack plates are swept away to make room for tinfoil pans heaped with mashed potatoes, pork chops, and salad. People from all around camp stream inside to serve up. The plywood bench seats fill. After a long day of travel, I gratefully accept the paper plate full of food offered to me by one of the cooks. After a while, someone asks what I'm doing in town. When I explain that I had been invited to stay for two months to interview people about Imperial Oil's nearby oilfield for my research, the mood becomes tense. Two women halfheartedly joke that I should give back the food if I'm working with Imperial Oil.

Once I clear up the misunderstanding, explaining that I'm here as a university student and not as an employee of

Imperial Oil, people are immediately more comfortable, and the mood lifts. I'm told I can keep my plate. A man jokes that I should get a T-shirt that says w"Not With Imperial," and the room laughs. We all finish our dinners, and I am offered dessert.

That summer, I spent two months conducting research in the tiny, fly-in-fly-out community of Fort Good Hope (Rádeyílkóé), a few kilometers south of the Arctic Circle.

Most people who live in Fort Good Hope are Dene or Métis. In this Indigenous belief system, humans and other-than-humans are tied together in a complex web of relations, bound by relationships based on respect and reciprocity.

The region's Indigenous peoples' cultures believe that land, water, humans, air, and animals are sentient. All beings hold power, agency, and value, as all are equal. All beings speak, even the land. The Fort Good Hope Dene and Métis people have their own distinct culture, history, and traditions. They are called the K'asho Got'ine.

A Short History of the Norman Wells Oilfield

More than 100 years ago, in 1919, a settler working for Imperial Oil "discovered" oil on the banks of the Mackenzie River. Nearly overnight, the region was transformed. Within two years, the Norman Wells Oilfield was established, and the town of Norman Wells sprung up nearby to house its employees. Its size, output, and impact have since grown dramatically. The oilfield has been harmful to the K'asho Got'ine way of life, all while enormously benefitting Imperial Oil. In the 1980s,

against the wishes of local people, the oilfield underwent a massive expansion, which included the construction of six artificial islands in the middle of the Mackenzie River.

The very embodiment of colonial extraction, a company from southern Canada extracting oil from Indigenous territory for more than a century, has a fitting, almost cartoonishly evil name: Imperial Oil. The company owns two-thirds of the Norman Wells Oilfield, and the Government of Canada owns the other third.

In years when Imperial Oil makes \$200 million in revenue, and the Canadian government additionally makes \$100 million, local people receive less than \$300k in total royalties and only \$100-200k in donations.

As of December 2020, fewer than 20% of the employees at the Norman Wells Oilfield are Indigenous to the Sahtú Region, though the workforce does fluctuate.¹ Employment is not a notable benefit for the region.

“We don't have anything to show for Imperial Oil having been here... Show me the library. Show me the art centre. Show me the Traditional Knowledge centre for Sahtú. Show me the swimming pool for the kids. Show me all those things that were left behind as a legacy,”² said Ethel Blondin-Andrew, the first Indigenous Member of Parliament in Canada at a public hearing. Later, she added that if Imperial Oil had done positive things for the Sahtú, they were “well hidden, because I've been looking.”³

After over a century of oil extraction, Imperial Oil has announced that they are closing the oilfield.

The company submitted a portion of its closure plan in 2022, starting with a proposal for a waste management facility. Sahtú people did not want the oilfield. They vocally opposed its expansion in the 1980s. They have experienced minimal financial benefit and extensive detriment for over a century. And yet, despite the harm brought to the North by Imperial Oil, the [company's official statement](#) reads: “A made-in-the-north solution is appropriate *rather than expecting the South*

to accept the North's waste” (emphasis added). The [Sahtú Secretariat Incorporated](#) shared that they consider “this statement to be a most egregious one, bordering on colonialism... Such thinking reflects badly on the company and makes light of the sacrifices the people of the Sahtú have made over the past one hundred years.”

The company just doesn't seem to understand how much damage they have done.

The Value of Reciprocity

One day, a local man sat me down on a stack of pallets beside the grocery store. One story he shared that day, among many others, was that if you hit a caribou with a stick, you would never see another one. I had no plans to hit any caribou, so this did not mean much to me.

He also told me that people from Fort Good Hope used to catch and dry herring in huge volumes, sometimes hundreds in a day. He lamented that it had been over 30 years since anybody had pulled that much herring out of the Mackenzie.

These two stories remained separate in my mind for weeks. Throughout my time in the Sahtú region, dozens of people warned me not to hit a caribou with a stick. I didn't understand why everybody was telling me this. Did I look like a person who would hit a caribou?

People also recounted stories of pulling herring out of the river by the bucketful, setting up camps to dry them, selling those dried fish to the Northern Store by the bale, and feeding herring to their dog teams during the winter. Then, they would note that herring had become a rarity to catch since the 1980s, just after the oilfield expansion.

The two threads finally came together for me when another Elder went through the familiar story and imparted the same warning about hitting caribou. This Elder explained that the contamination from the islands being constructed, the noise made by trucks and heavy machinery when it was being built, the siltation and contamination, then taking so much oil and using so much water, combined with our lack of respect, amounted to mistreatment of the fish. The herring had disappeared, he believed, because expanding and

operating the oilfield was like hitting a caribou with a stick.

K'asho Got'ine place incredible value on the value of reciprocity. A community – and its culture – doesn't survive thousands of years in the harsh Arctic without treating one another and the land well. If your fish net is extra full one week, you give some fish to your neighbour. Then, if you have an unsuccessful hunt that autumn, another neighbour might share some moose with you. All beings take care of one another. If we are good to the fish, they will remain. If we strike the caribou, they will disappear.

Violating the reciprocal relationship between people and land, whether by hitting a caribou with a stick or by extracting oil at Norman Wells violates this important rule.

Settlers have continually taken from the land, and she has started taking back. The cost of our disrespect has so far been the near-disappearance of an entire species. What else will she take from us before we learn to listen?

Imperial Engagement

In 2004, Elder Lucy Jackson said in a public hearing for Imperial Oil's water license renewal: “We live on the fish right down the Mackenzie Valley, and the ecosystem is really a concern to the peoples. [...] So, I question the credibility of how that is safe for eating.”

Ten years later, in 2014, at a hearing for Imperial Oil's next Water License Renewal, Ethel Blondin-Andrew, the first Indigenous woman to serve in Canadian Parliament and as a federal cabinet minister, spoke. In her role as President of the Sahtú Secretariat Incorporated, acting as a representative of Indigenous people in the Sahtú region, Blondin-Andrew said that she was “not prepared to eat those fish.”

In 2024, at another public hearing, yet another community member said: “I am hesitant to eat any fish that comes out of the river today. I am worried about the effects of possible contaminants.” Many others echoed this sentiment.

Despite whatever the results of Imperial Oil's scientific monitoring may show, if these studies are not done with full transparency and community input, if the results are not explained in ways that are easy to understand, and if they are not done in ways that build trust, the results will not matter to the community. As it stands, Imperial Oil maintains that they are not at fault. The K'asho Got'ine have their doubts.

I interviewed dozens of people in Fort Good Hope about their experiences with Imperial Oil for my Master's research. I asked how they'd been engaged with the upcoming Norman Wells Oilfield closure planning, how they'd felt about that engagement, and what they wanted out of future engagement. I also spoke with many others on the phone, over cups of tea, at community barbecues, at the sewing club, bingo night, graduation, on boats, and at all kinds of town activities.

What I found out is that Imperial Oil's past engagement with the K'asho Got'ine has long been ineffective because it has not been appropriate for the local culture, governance approach, or style of communication. The rare times Imperial Oil does engage with the community, the information it shares is packed with technical jargon that's hard to follow. These sessions often feel more like lectures than conversations. People say their questions are brushed aside, or the answers they get don't match what they asked. Trust in the company has eroded. By ignoring local values of respect and reciprocity, Imperial's attempts at engagement and consultation have missed the mark.

The herring is another example of this. Imperial Oil's studies do not engage with ideas of respect or reciprocity, and because Western science cannot *see* the connection between oilfield operations and the [disappearance of herring](#), Imperial Oil has determined that there is no connection.

Imperial Oil has announced its intention to close the oilfield. With the closure now approaching, we need to reaffirm the K'asho Got'ine right to lead the reclamation. They must be allowed to define how the land should be used in the future, how to handle the waste safely, and how to repair relationships with the land. K'asho Got'ine must set standards for cleanup, and must be allowed to decide what constitutes “clean” and “safe.”

The land is speaking, the K'asho Got'ine are telling us so. Yet, we continue not to listen. Their water is polluted, their fish are disappearing. We are not listening. We are only talking.

Listening to the Land

I have returned to the Sahtú Region many times since that first visit. I've had dinners of fish that I pulled out of a net on a frozen lake, lain in the snow watching the northern lights dance, turned sticky spruce tips into tea for a friend's sore throat, and sewn beads onto moose hide in front of a warm woodstove. I've waved hello to wildflowers, hand-picked blueberries to eat with ice cream, swam in the Rabbitskin river on hot days, and watched a blazing orange sunset last for hours. I have begun to understand the reverence with which people discuss the Mackenzie River, the nearby lakes, the paths that wind around town. I, myself, have begun to love the land. And slowly, I have begun to hear the land whispering, but I can't quite make out what she's saying.

At the end of a recent trip, I had the window seat on the flight out. These small planes fly pretty low, so I kept my eyes glued to the ground nearly the entire time. I spotted something out the window, and as we drew closer and it came into focus, I asked the man beside me what I was looking at. With great surprise and joy, he told me that what I witnessed that day should be a secret between me and the land, to tell nobody what she said. He told me what the land was saying and how lucky I was to hear it. He has heard her loud and clear for his entire life. I only heard a fragment of what she said that day, and my, oh my, what she said was beautiful.

For over 100 years, the relationship between Imperial Oil and the K'asho Got'ine has been far from reciprocal, almost uniformly extractive, mirrored by Imperial's relationship with the land. Imperial Oil has spent centuries taking, stealing, and extracting.

Its disrespect has pumped billions of dollars in oil out of the ground, nearly extirpated an entire species of fish, and polluted a waterway that sustains an entire people. Despite enormous profit, very little has benefitted those

who live and rely on the land. Finally, though, Imperial Oil has taken almost all it can take.

We must make sure Imperial Oil gives back. Let us learn from the people of the Sahtú how to repay the land for all we have taken from her. If you, like me, cannot truly hear the land, then you must trust those who can.

The land speaks to the K'asho Got'ine, and they have been trying to translate for us. All we need to do is listen.

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Endnotes

1. Jaci Mersereau, direct message to the author on May 3, 2023.
2. Sahtu Land and Water Board: Imperial Oil Norman Wells Operation: Water License Renewal, S13L1-007, Public Hearing, June 14, 2014, Norman Wells, NT, 40.
3. Sahtu Land and Water Board, Public Hearing, 63.