

I chose to research and discuss this project because it brought up a lot of questions for me. There are many examples of clear cut colonial infrastructure being built on unceded Indigenous territories without consent and/or explicitly against Indigenous peoples' wishes. The Wataynikaneyap Power Transmission Line intrigued me because it is on indigenous land but is being done in co-operation with several First Nations communities. In fact it was proposed by a community leader of North Caribou Lake First Nation, Margaret Kenequanash. She's fought to bring this transmission line into fruition for almost a decade. I was curious to see if this evaded colonial tentacles entirely or simply minimized their reach.

Twenty-two First Nation's communities are working in cooperation and own fifty-one percent of the company named Wataynikaneyap Power. The company is in the process of building out a power transmission line in northwestern Ontario, Canada. The line will span 1,800 kilometres operating 230 kV, 115 kV, and 44 kV lines and help 17 First Nations communities end their reliance on diesel generators. These remote communities include; Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug, Lac des Mille Lacs, Lac Seul, McDowell Lake, Muskrat Dam, North Caribou Lake, North Spirit Lake, Pikangikum, Poplar Hill, Sachigo Lake, Sandy Lake, Slate Falls, Wabigoon Lake, Wapekeka, Wawakapewin, Wunnumin Lake, Mishkeegogamang, Ojibway Nation of Saugeen, Bearskin Lake, Cat Lake, Deer Lake, Kasabonika Lake, Keewaywin and Kingfisher Lake. These communities imminent connection to the Ontario Power Grid will reduce greenhouse emissions while improving the individual health of Indigenous community members. The twenty-two First Nations communities involved will have the opportunity to increase their ownership over several decades. At some point in the future they could own 100% of the project. This naturally leads one to wonder why they can't be the sole owners at the outset. What interpersonal and systemic biases are in place that would prevent

these nations from securing a loan from a bank or accredited institution to own more of the company, and thus the project, initially?

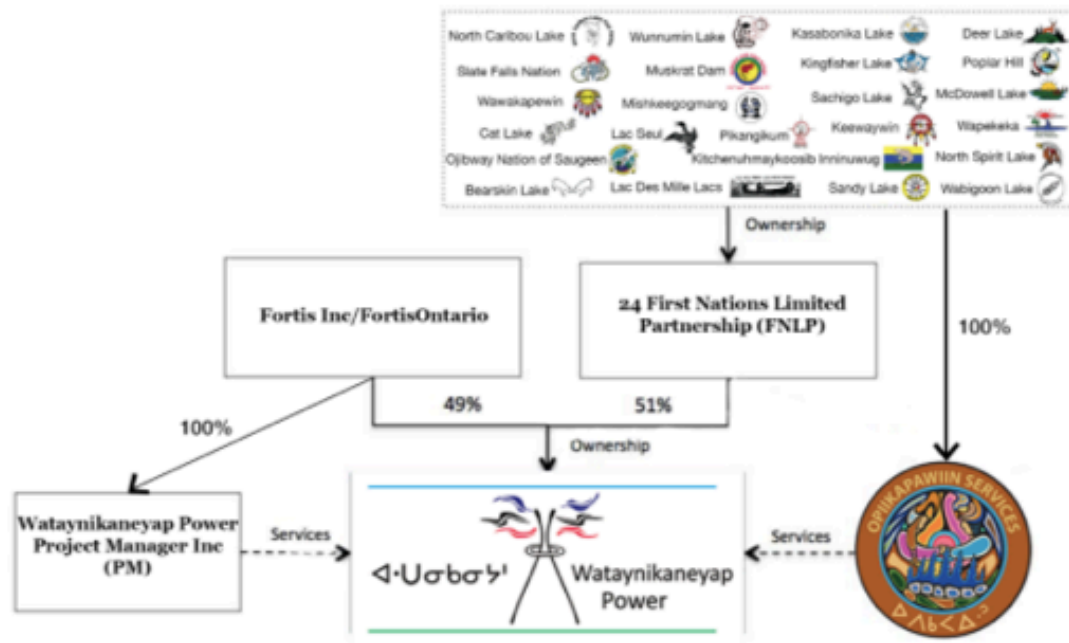


Figure 1. A diagram of the Wataynikaneyap Power Transmission Line

Source: <https://www.wataypower.ca/>

Taking a wider viewpoint, why don't the nations have the total amount at their disposal in the first place? Intentional erasure, land theft and property laws explicitly attacked Indigenous existence and autonomy since colonizers first made contact. This destroyed any existing wealth and hindered the ability to build capital within Indigenous communities. More accurately, a patriarchal capitalist economy was put into place by settlers who deemed what may have been considered Indigenous forms of wealth (generational knowledge, agriculture, spiritual ceremony and connection) worthless. To clarify, I'm not alleging explicit, compulsory business deals thrust upon Indigenous citizens in this case, though historically that certainly did happen. Rather, the current culture fostered by historical events, facilitated a layered coercion that spans decades,

economies and environmental events. For instance, the mental and physical impact of trauma can reduce one's ability to work, attend school and ultimately to progress in a world that bases success on an individual's ability to contribute to capitalism. As these effects multiply amongst individuals and households, it affects the financial standing of Indigenous nations as a whole. This would not only influence the base amount that Indigenous nations have to invest in projects like these, but would also restrict abilities to get loans according to a capitalist, narrow minded set of standards banks and other institutions use to decide who is eligible for investment, loans etc. Therefore the imposed timeline for the Indigenous nations involved to own the project outright is a result of colonial actions in the past directly causing events that led to the progressive and present financial status of these and other Indigenous nations. Furthermore, the wealth of the corporate partners and private investors is likely generational wealth from resources directly extracted from, if not foraged and traded upon stolen land. If Indigenous nations had not been brutally removed, and had instead kept sovereignty over their ancestral homelands the wealth from centuries of resources would be accumulated inside Indigenous communities. Was any of that factored into the cost when ownership contracts were written up, when shares were being allotted? Is it right for the nations to be paying at all to gain sustainable electricity provision and resultant improved community health, less pollution etc. from land that is if not legally, at the very least rightfully theirs?

Forty-nine percent of the company is owned by a combination of private investors and a utilities company named Fortis Inc., headquartered in St. John's, Newfoundland. I was unable to find any concrete information on the alleged several other, private investors. I wouldn't be without precedent to assume that they are majority white investors, gaining profit and buffering previously existing generational wealth for white families. As the majority owners, the First

Nations communities will be doing a great deal of labour to erect these transmission lines. There is a sour echo in white people and corporate bodies brokering some sort of deal, often on the backs of Indigenous peoples' pain, sacrifice and labour, that grows their own fortunes. Prior to this project, it was basically unheard of for Fortis Inc. to cede majority ownership. They stated the environmental and social benefits of the partnership to be deciding factors. Fortis executives said that Indigenous priorities were essential to the project and that contracts and scheduling included "a requirement that the project not interfere with seasonal activities such as hunting and trapping, and that no herbicides be used along the line." Though I would like to believe that a large corporation has a heart of gold all of a sudden, I think it's realistic to note the positive media/public relations and good will this will buy them for future projects. Not to mention the financial gains from their portion of the transmission line. The intention behind the partnership is not necessarily relevant to the outcome, which could be on the whole a positive development for First Nations peoples. It is however, worth noting in terms of colonial influence in this venture.

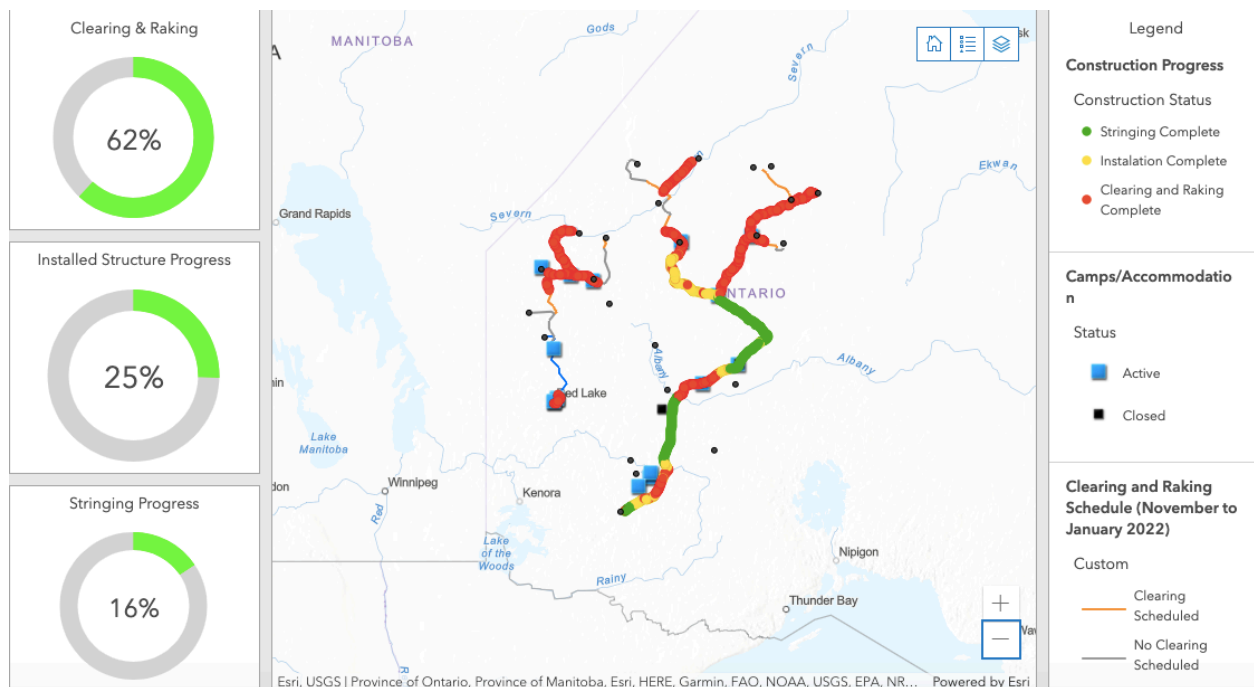


Figure 2. Visual and statistical representation of the Wataynikaneyap Power transmission line construction progress as of October 29, 2021. Source: <https://www.wataypower.ca/> & arcgis

An environmental impact assessment will take place considering the effects on.....

As the study has not been completed, results are not publicly available as of yet. Some concerns of environmental degradation may be impacts [colonial in nature] to be considered. Ecologically harmful effects are inherently colonial as Indigenous systems prioritize and value the earth and her resources, while colonial powers maintain a temporally consistent bulldozing of Indigenous sovereignty and natural ecology in order to benefit themselves financially, politically and otherwise. There are several organizations and community members concerned about the environmental effects of some projects that the transmission line will provide electricity for. One such venture is the plan to implement further infrastructure in Ontario's "Ring of Fire" region, particularly proposals to mine there. Mining projects will disturb essential peat bogs in Hudson's Bay Lowlands. This area and its vegetation serve as a carbon sink and temperature control device, especially vital in this time of escalating ramifications of human and industry induced climate change. The Sierra Club calls it "one of the most ecocidal threats to our planet" (Sierra Club, 2021).



Figure 3. Map of the Wataynikaneyap Power Transmission Line, phase 1. Source: <https://www.wataypower.ca/>

The Hudson Bay Lowlands contain as much water as the entire Great Lakes. They also serve as a refuge for all the species that were found there after the end of the Pleistocene extinctions 6,000 years ago. Two of the species that live here, the Woodland Caribou and the Wolverine, use it as a last stand after being driven out of other corners of Ontario. The Ring of Fire is situated in the Nishnawbe Aski Nation Territory, a Territory that signed the 1905 Treaty to share the resources in the Treaty 9 Territory. There has been insufficient and minimal consultation with the NAN Leaders and community members from government officials on future plans in the region. Resources, such as Nickel, are already being liquidated in the region by mining companies.

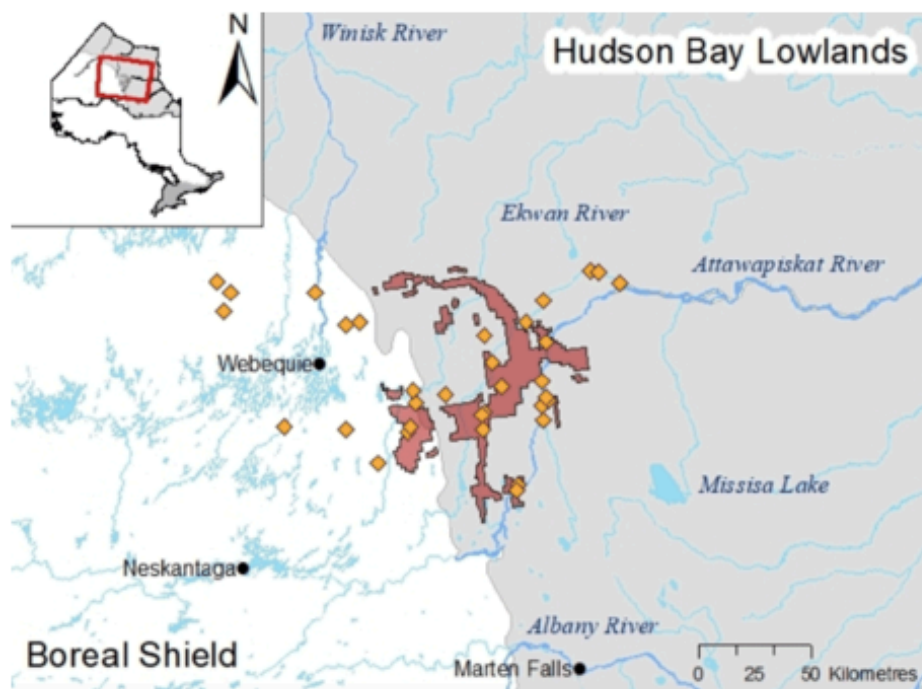


Figure 4. Map showing Stream sites (diamonds) near the Ring of Fire mineral deposit (red) where small-bodied fish communities were sampled in 2016 and 2018. Streams were in both the Hudson Bay Lowlands Ecozone and the Ontario Shield Ecozone. Source: Patterson et al., 2020.

To what degree is corporate responsibility applicable in this case, if not in a legal, perhaps in a moral sense. Is this like asking if Facebook is responsible for racist posts or the sale

of stolen items on marketplace? Or is it more parallel to enquiring whether Bell or Rogers is responsible for cyber-crimes committed on their networks? Does the fact that Indigenous beliefs portend to caring for the land in particular have any bearing on the alleged responsibility for the projects that the power line may contribute to? Or is that conveniently placed, racialized moral absolutism, holding people of colour to a higher standard where their white counterparts would be given a wider berth, with more room for nuance and understanding of complex intentions?

I set out to excavate the colonial roots and/or aspects of this project. It seems that a colonial root may be in an outsiders perspectives on it. As a non-Indigenous person it's impossible for me to understand the emotional toll of their lived experience, the generational and daily compounded traumas of survival in a white supremacist, racist, genocidal country and society at large. In the same token I'm also unable to truly understand their fierce sense of community, commitment to retribution, protection, connection and their relationship with the land. I believe that all of the above contributed to the nations' decision to buy into this project both ideologically as well as financially. It's not right for anyone, but particularly white people to pass judgement on the path chosen for survival and an attempt at growth and community support, when it was one of limited options in a restricted and blatantly racist system that Indigenous people did not ask to be a part of but are nonetheless often forced to work within. It's especially short sighted for white people to lack compassion as these choices by Indigenous nations took place in a system that was built for/by and to this day caters to, the people doing the potential judging. Kenequanash said;

“[we are] Creating those opportunities and change in the community, in terms of bringing reliable infrastructure so that we can develop that vision... In doing so, we will protect all our children in the future. What are we going to do to make a change? What action needs to be made

—as an individual, as a company, as an entity or corporation, to change history? In thinking about this project, that’s exactly what we’re trying to do, is to make that change.”

In any case, some action needs to be taken, things cannot remain the way they are, with Indigenous communities at the whims of colonial law and infrastructure, continuously suppressed and ignored on their own lands. They cannot remain under the heel of environmental racism with diesel generators and local pollution in their disconnected locations. Whether or not buying into a corporate structure with white business partners is the precise “right” move isn’t entirely clear at this point, but it is movement, it is justified experimentation in the name of growth and sovereignty and it appears that is being done with as much intention and care as possible within the given constraints.

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