Community Fishing Event, Water Quality and Fish Monitoring Launch Summer of 2011

A regional scale community based fish health study on Athabasca River and Slave River is starting this summer. The intention is to study fish from the Slave River near Fort Resolution and Fort Smith and the Athabasca River near the communities of Fort Chipewyan, Fort McKay and Fort McMurray. The study will assess metal and organic contaminant concentrations in fish, and measures of fish health (including gene expression and histology).

Communities along the Athabasca River, Peace-Athabasca Delta, Slave River and the Slave River Delta are concerned about unhealthy looking fish that have been caught in the area. Concerns are related to upstream development such as oil sands and hydro development complicated by climate change.

Fish will be collected during “community fishing events” at 4 times during the year, starting in June 2011. Fish health experts from the University of Saskatchewan will be present to collect samples to assess fish health. They will analyze the samples and report the results back to the communities. Funding is being provided to University of Saskatchewan researchers by the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Boreal Songbird Initiative.

The first set of “community fishing events” was completed in Fort Resolution, Ft. Smith and Ft. Chipewyan, Fort MacKay and Fort McMurray. At the Fort Smith Fishing Day training was provided by scientists from several different Universities for fish sampling and water quality sampling and was available to community members involved in community-based monitoring. This training was attended by Celine Harp and Muskwa of Ft. McKay. This initiative is occurring specifically to address community capacity building concerns related to fish health therefore, no honorariums will be provided for participation in the community fishing events.

There will be the opportunity to take part in sharing circles at each community fishing event. Participants in these circles can share their concerns and observations about changes to the fish, environment, and human health. The fishing day events will be videotaped, and the videos will be shared with all community members that are interested. The events will also be summarized in a newsletter using photos, stories, and results from the lab tests. The newsletter will be made available to all communities that are participating in the study.

In the NWT, this initiative is part of the Slave River and Delta Partnership. Partners include the: The communities of Fort Smith and Fort Resolution, Salt River, Smiths Landing and Deninu K’ue First Nations, the NWT Métis Nation and Fort Smith and Fort Resolution Métis Councils, Department of Environment and Natural Resources (GNWT), Fisheries and Oceans, Parks Canada, Environment

July, 2011, Newsletter
Canada, Aurora Research Institute, and Aurora College. Fish Health experts from the University of Saskatchewan and Department of Fisheries will collect samples.

Last summer in Hatchet Lake during Keepers IV many of us interested in developing a traditional foods program met with Dr. Erin Kelly. The intent of the traditional foods project is to collect, store and analyze toxins in fish, moose, berries and other traditional foods and thereby develop a long term monitoring program. This will enable communities to determine quantity and quality effects on traditional foods by tarsands, uranium and hydropower developments impacting aboriginal livelihoods. Dr. Kelly and her colleges have obtained money to begin work this summer. The Keepers of the Athabasca are helping with the Ft. McKay and Ft. McMurray fishing days. This is a critical start to the traditional foods program and is vital to developing a baseline to understand what is happening to fish in the Athabasca River and downstream. We hope to help with similar work at Cold Lake.

We need boats and fuel, 4 inch gillnets and experienced fishers and fish cutters. The catch goal is 30 each of the following species, jackfish, walleye, goldeye, ling, burbot and whitefish from which samples will be sent to university labs for analysis. It may take more than 2 days to catch and clean these numbers. This number of fish samples will be needed four times per year for four years.

Keepers and allies hosted a fish day picnic and barbeque at each community of Ft. McKay and Ft. McMurray. Amy Cairns of the First Nations (AB) Technical Services Advisory Group (TSAG) and the Family News Service (FNS) department of the Indian Red Cross Society (IRCS) helped with this. Although the fishing was not completed on the intended days because of high water it was continued when the water level subsided and the required samples were obtained. John O’Conner, Roland Woodward, Bob Schneider and others helped organize the Ft. McMurray fishing day. Gordie McDonald, Celine Harp and Muskwa are helping with the Ft. Mckay fishing days.

We need your help. If you can help please call Roland, 780-972-1339, Celine, or Harvey, 780-675-4158 for more information about the project please contact: Erin Kelly erin_kelly@gov.nt.ca Roland Woodward rolandwoodward@live.com or Harvey Scott haecosse@hotmail.com

Keepers of the Athabasca Annual General Meeting

The AGM took place on June 3-5, 2011 in Fawcett Alberta. The general meeting was well organized and attended, thanks to our hosts Julie Burke, Cindy Coats and Elder Kim Burke. Friday opened with a film presentation by Albert Karvenon and a traditional sharing circle. We were entertained on Saturday by the amazing fiddle playing of Rod Olstead of Edmonton. This year’s Chairs are Roland Woodward, Cody Woodward and Julie Burke. Colleen Whitedeer of Saskatchewan is our secretary. New board members are Bruce Jackson, Harlan Light and Cindy Coats. Kim Burke and Nancy Woodward are part of our Elders council along with Marie Adams and Violet Clarke. On behalf of keepers of the Athabasca I would like to welcome all new and old executive, and board and council members. I would also like to thank everyone who attended and made this year’s AGM possible. The 2010-2011 year was full and productive and this upcoming year promises to be exciting with the development of the Green Energy Project in Ft. Chipewyan and the launch of the KeepersWatch program on the Pembina River. For a full report see the minutes posted on the Keepers website.

July, 2011, Newsletter
United Nations Negotiates Legally Binding Global Mercury Treaty

Mary Richardson will attend a workshop on behalf of Keepers in Ottawa on Canada’s negotiating position on a global legally binding mercury treaty being negotiated through the UN Environmental Program (UNEP).

Mary participated in all aspects of the discussion on the elements of the treaty, but took special pains to raise the question of mercury released from oil and gas operations, including extraction, refining, and burning. As you know, it has only recently been recognized by the federal and provincial governments, as a result of Kelly and Schindler’s paper that not all the mercury released in the tar sands area is naturally occurring. Canada has yet to address this issue as improved monitoring systems have not yet been set up, and they are only a preliminary step in actually doing something about the problem. When Canada claims that it has eliminated 90% of its air emissions of mercury, it is either not including emissions from the oil or gas industry, or its estimates are not based on credible scientific research. Also, Canada wants to treat emissions to land and water as local or regional, not global, issues, but it received pushback on this position from many attendees. Mary will be providing a full report to Environment Canada.

Keepers Concerned with Proposed Site C Dam on the Peace River

The proposal to construct another mega dam on the Peace River known as the Site C Dam is currently under review by the Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency, to determine its acceptability and the type of environmental assessment that will be required. The Agency is also working closely with the British Columbia Environmental Assessment Office (EAO) to explore opportunities to undertake a
coordinated review. A notice of commencement will be posted for the Project in the Canadian Environmental Assessment Registry (on the Agency's web-site http://www.ceaa-acee.gc.ca/default.asp?lang=En&n=D75FB358-1) when the federal environmental assessment begins.

The following excerpts, letters, tributes and articles are included on behalf of Keepers board and council members concerned about the potential construction of the Site C Dam on the Mighty Peace River.

From West Coast Environmental Law

Read Treaty 8 First Nations appeal to the UN to intervene against proposed Site C Dam by Hannah Askew. “In making their appeal to the UN, the T8TA have invoked the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which Canada has recently endorsed. Among other things, UNDRIP codifies the existing international legal doctrine recognizing Indigenous peoples’ right to free, prior and informed consent to development projects on their territories, which has been established in other documents and international legal decisions. This standard provides that Indigenous peoples must be informed about, and give free consent to, development projects that will affect their lands and resources prior to government approval of the process. There is a good argument to be made that any decision to approve and build the Site C Dam without obtaining the free, prior and informed consent of Treaty 8 First Nations is potentially a violation of Canada's commitments under international law.”

The Peace Valley Environmental Association (PVEA) states the following in their letter to the federal minister of Environment.

“This is a mega-project that spans federal, provincial and territorial jurisdictions. It will affect residents, waterways, fisheries, wildlife, agriculture and First Nation’s abilities to exercise their treaty rights in British Columbia, Alberta and the Northwest Territories. The proposed dam would destroy third-generation family farms. It would flood over 11,000 acres of agricultural land, including over 7,000 acres of exceptionally high quality agricultural Class 1 and Class 2 land, capable of a substantial contribution to future food sustainability. It would also severely impact the narrowest point of the Yellowstone to Yukon wildlife conservation corridor and destroy unique ecosystems, species and microclimates of the Peace River Valley.”

The following excerpts are from a letter that was sent out June 17, 2011 on behalf of the Keepers of the Athabasca to the Federal Minister of the Environment.

The Keepers of the Athabasca Watershed Council hereby requests that BC Hydro’s proposed Site C Clean Energy Project [Site C dam] on the Peace River in northeastern British Columbia be subject to a full panel federal environmental assessment [EA]. We believe that no other federal and/or provincial process would provide the opportunity to fully and adequately assess the diverse array of issues associated with this project, especially its effects on fish, wildlife, water and aboriginal residents of the Peace-Athabasca Delta area, which lies within the Athabasca River and Lake Basin in Alberta. The Delta is already heavily impacted by the Bennett Dam on the Peace River in British Columbia and is of direct concern to our membership, many of whom are reliant on this region for their livelihood. The proposed Site C dam would likely have further negative impacts on our membership.
The Peace-Athabasca Delta is the world’s largest boreal freshwater delta and is one of the most important waterfowl nesting and staging areas in North America. A Ramsar Convention Wetland and UNESCO World Heritage Site, it is among the world's most ecologically significant wetlands. Millions of birds come to nest in the delta, including the internationally threatened whooping crane. Traditionally, the delta has been alive with a diversity of life that is dependent on the Peace and Athabasca Rivers to bring in nutrient-rich sediment, which washed over the delta in a flood cycle - the rivers flooded the delta and refilled thousands of wetlands, depositing nutrient rich sediment that created the delta's sprawling flat marshland nature. This marshland is critical to the aboriginal people who have hunted, fished and trapped in the delta region for over 7,000 years. The delta continues to be an important part of their livelihood today and the health of the delta is essential to maintain their lifestyle in the future.

Now, however, the Peace-Athabasca Delta is drying out. The flood events that were essential to the delta's productivity have become rare since the Bennett Dam was built in 1968. Flow regulation on the Peace River, in conjunction with a natural drying trend, has reduced seasonal flooding that is important in maintaining the deltaic ecosystem. Hundreds of thousands of hectares of productive marshes are becoming willow forests which are low in productivity with resulting wildlife populations that are a small fraction of their pre-Bennett Dam numbers. Hundreds of kilometers of formerly navigable channels are now too shallow for boats most of the time. This delta drying trend is being further impacted by massive water withdrawals from the Lower Athabasca River for the oil sands industry.

“Fish population and ecosystem structure and function in the Peace-Athabasca Delta have been investigated by a number of researchers (e.g., Donald 1977, Donald and Kooveman 1974). It is evident that the delta is richly diverse in its species and supports important spawning and rearing habitat for several species of fishes (NRBS 1994, Paul 2009). The perched basins are rich in spring and summer production, when used by juveniles and the forage fish guild. Paul (2009) demonstrated that discharge in the Lower Athabasca River and lake level in Lake Athabasca affect walleye recruitment. It is well documented that the operation of the WC Bennett Dam on the Peace River has shrunk the wetted perimeter on the north side of the Peace Athabasca Delta if not all of the delta” (Boag 2010).

Cumulative impacts from human industrial and other activities on the Peace and the Athabasca Rivers make the care of the delta a complex issue. The Peace-Athabasca Delta is critical to the traditional culture and livelihood rights of the First Nations peoples who occupy the lands surrounding it. The impacts of B.C. Hydro’s Bennett Dam have already had devastating and long-term impacts to First Nations, such as the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation (ICC 1996). Current evidence shows that declining water flows in the Athabasca River are adversely affecting the ability of Mikisew Cree First Nation and Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation members from accessing their traditional hunting and fishing areas and their Indian Reserve Lands, in the Peace-Athabasca Delta (Candler et al. 2010).

Water flow issues in the Peace River are multi-jurisdictional, involving municipal, interprovincial, territorial, federal, and First Nations government levels, as well as having an international scope. To maintain the ecological integrity of the Peace-Athabasca Delta, solutions must involve a coordinated effort of all levels of government and include grass roots input. As mitigation of delta impacts from the Bennett Dam are yet to be resolved it would be a devastating loss to the delta to further impact the Peace River with the construction of the Site C Dam. A full panel federal EA is the process required to adequately consider the environmental impacts of this highly controversial project.
Norine Wark, founding member of Keepers of the Water, has provided the following tribute to the Peace River and the residents of the Mighty Peace River Basin.

Our family drove through miles of pristine wilderness, unaware that we were mere hours ahead of the early-released flood waters when our home was lost in 1967 during the construction of Williston Reservoir and the W.A.C. Bennett Dam. I was 7 years old. The trauma that I felt, the endless nightmares about drowning people and wildlife, and the destruction of our wilderness still haunt me to this day. I have a hard time fighting back the tears when I think of Site C.

W.A.C. Bennett’s party decided that they would release the flood waters a few days earlier than what was stated in the final letter that our family received. This was done for political reasons - a massive project completed ahead of schedule, according to the film that they proudly show tourists at the dam sites today! As a child, I could not understand a society that supported a man who put his political ambition before honesty, integrity, and most of all, others’ lives. To me, it was a world gone mad.

At the time of the flooding, our mail box was 200 miles away. Even if a new letter had been issued, we would have had no way of knowing of the last minute change in government plans. The mill located 6 miles from our home was already shut down, so there was no one with a radio phone who could have told us about this last minute decision. The roads were seasonal, so Dad and the other trucker who helped
move us had a battle getting through the rising waters that crossed the roads to get to us. We had an even worse time on our way out. (I have some old photos of creeks that had turned into rivers by the time we got to them.) We had forgotten a couple things back at the house. We considered turning around, but Dad was really worried about the rapidly rising waters. His decision may have saved our lives.

When we arrived at Mackenzie (which was just a gas station and a couple other buildings back then), we found out that we got out 11 hours ahead of the main flood water release. Years later I saw footage taken by helicopter of hundreds of bloated, dead animal carcasses littered among the zillion trees that had already floated to the top of the water for as far as the eye could see. The footage was taken about a year after the flood. What I had imagined was realized.

Another thing that haunted me was the fact that many aboriginal people in that area were nomadic in nature. I saw two videos on the Tall Grass People a few years back. These documentaries recorded stories of people who had no idea about the project; they ran for high ground, not knowing what calamity was upon them. We used to pick berries and share tea with these people. I often wonder how many drowned. Sometimes I still have nightmares about all of this. Site C keeps the wound fresh. Truth be told, the Tar Sands projects have a similar effect on me.

Many of us lost a lot for the sake of W.A.C. Bennett’s political ambitions. We were all promised free hydro electricity for the rest of our lives. Some of those who chose to resettle along the existing banks of Williston still do not have electricity - let alone free electricity! The grossly exaggerated predictions for a sharp rise in domestic energy consumption were never realized, but who recalls that propaganda today? (What is it they say about history repeating itself?)

I was fortunate to walk the lands with Larry Peterson and his wife while gathering content for the Peace Valley Environment Association (PVEA) website: www.peacevalley.ca. His father-in-law and he used to own a huge market garden. They produced enough potatoes from two fields next to the Peace River to feed all of northeastern BC. In fact, if you visit the PVEA website, you may see a photo that I took of some horses. They are standing on the massive root cellar where the Petersons stored the potatoes. Larry and his father-in-law fought to keep their lands when the government wanted to build Site C in the late 1970's and early 1980's. They lost the battle, and were forced to sell the land for a fraction of what it was worth. Larry’s father-in-law became quite ill during the process, and subsequently sold his share in the business.

Larry still owns and farms the upper fields, but they are less productive. Most of the market gardens are gone now. BC Hydro does not take care of the lands, so they are filled with noxious weeds. It is hard for Larry and his wife to look out on these fields that have been vacant and unproductive for 30+ years now. What a travesty of justice!

July, 2011, Newsletter
Many of the valley residents tell of the toll that the 1980's battle took on their pioneering parents. One family blames the heart attack that killed their father on the Site C battle. How do you live day by day for over thirty years, knowing that your government is using your tax dollars to push a political agenda that is profiting foreign industries, while preventing you from feeding past, present and future generations in your homeland?

To me there are a hundred valid reasons for why this valley should not be flooded.

The major dilemma that we face is similar to the Tar Sands situation - the majority of the voting public is physically removed from the point of wanton, haphazard destruction. They hear 'employment' and 'economic benefit', but rarely pause to ask how much, how long and for whom. The government has done an excellent job of making the Site C project sound like very little cumulative impact will be experienced. What we need are funds to run a full advertising campaign in Vancouver and Victoria that speak open, frank and honest truths that promote an informed dialogue among citizens. I envision large billboards in strategic places, kiosks in malls and other public gathering places, and the like.

Through ongoing efforts various people, including some well-respected academics and scientists, are struggling to present the economic, environmental and socio-political facts about this project. I think that there has been some success, as the last provincial Throne speech finally confessed that Site C is meant for energy export. We have learned that the energy is slated to fuel the dirty shale gas project in the Fort Nelson area, and the Tar Sands in Alberta. Tribal Chief Liz Logan and one of the PVEA biologists (who worked on numerous Peace River wildlife and aquatic studies, mostly for BC Hydro) are travelling throughout the province right now, visiting various dignitaries. Chief Logan was able to gain audience at the UN while on this journey. The World Bank no longer funds large hydro electric projects in developing nations due to such political pressures. Let’s hope that the UN has similar success in our case.

All of our efforts are paying off. More and more people are becoming aware of the complexity of this issue, and the foreign interest agenda behind it.

This letter from the Keepers of the Athabasca will serve to remind people of our province that this is a Canadian (if not international) issue, that other provinces will suffer, rather than profit, and that our regulatory bodies must do their job. Please pass on our most heartfelt thanks to all involved.
The following testimonial on the effects of damming the Peace River on the Peace/Athabasca Delta is from John Rigney, long time resident of Ft. Chipewyan.

“I can make this type of statement: I have shared a few pictures from Athabasca part of the delta, all post-Bennett Dam. The great difference in pre-and-post photos is that hundreds of families have moved out of the delta and their homes, trails and clearings are gone. The photos show the Peace Athabasca Delta inundated twice since 1968 when the Bennett Dam was closed.

They illustrate the rich silt that is deposited by a flood, in this case our yard.

In April 1974 an ice jam on the Slave River inundated the entire Peace-Athabasca Delta. It was said to be a one in a hundred year occurrence caused by record snowfall and early melting. Over the next 5 years the delta largely dried out and marshes turned to willow forest.

Then in 1996 BC Hydro spilled a vast amount of water to lower its reservoir, keeping the Peace so high that Lake Athabasca rose 2.4 meters during the summer, filling the delta channels to the brim. The water didn't recede in winter of 96/97 due to ice dams on the Slave River; Fort Chip's fuel and essentials had to be airlifted that winter. In spring 1997 the rivers were still brim-full so there was extensive delta flooding in late April from ice jams. Then two rainfall events in the Athabasca watershed caused the Athabasca delta to flood extensively again in June and then again in July. The last time this had happened was in the fifties, before the Bennett Dam. The delta again dried out and Lake Athabasca dropped by two meters by 1999.

The largest cause of the drying of the delta is the Bennett Dam which impounds the summer mountain runoff in the Peace watershed. The Peace River controls the height of Lake Athabasca, and without the mountain runoff the Peace is considerably lower than before the dam. Lake Athabasca in turn sets the height of water in the delta channels and connected basins. With the lake low the shallow delta basins and channels are no longer accessible and many basins have dried out. The result has been the loss of
vast areas of marsh habitat and the life the marshes supported and the people who depended on the delta's resources.

The Site C Dam could add to the effects of the Bennett Dam and Peace Canyon Dam by further impounding rainfall and smoothing out the river crests, and by further reducing the frequency of spring ice jams. I cannot trust BC Hydro's statements because over a period of 40 years I have seen them invest significant effort in discrediting both science and traditional knowledge at the expense of Fort Chipewyan and Wood Buffalo National Park.”

The beautiful valley of the Mighty Peace River, picture compliments of Norine Wark

**These Excerpts are from Damming Evidence by Briony Penn, July 2011**  
China’s premier admits the massive Three Gorges Dam has created “urgent problems.” Is anybody at BC Hydro listening?

“The premier of China, Wen Jiabo, recently made an official announcement that the Three Gorges dam, the world’s largest hydroelectric project, which has created a reservoir twice the length of Vancouver Island and displaced 1.3 million people, is experiencing “urgent problems.” Urgent on every front—dead water zones, pollution of drinking supplies, siltation, landslides, earthquakes, erosion, and drought. The project is also generating less power than it was designed for because of the danger of raising the reservoir to optimum levels; there’s been more displacement of residents, and massive destruction of the river ecosystems.”

July, 2011, Newsletter
“Canada can take part of the blame for this fiasco: it was a Canadian consortium of engineering companies—including BC Hydro International, a subsidiary of BC Hydro—whose feasibility study for China’s Ministry of Water Resources and Electric Power gave the green light to the Three Gorges dam. Financed by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) for $14 million, the study was completed in 1988. The fact that Canadian and BC companies and politicians jumped on the bandwagon for such a problematic mega-project should give British Columbians pause about our own huge scale dam proposal: Site C on the Peace River. The proposed dam is just south of Fort St. John, downstream of the W.A.C. Bennett Dam and the Peace Canyon Dam. Despite being far away, the two Peace dams have become an essential part of every Victorian’s life. The electricity generated there lights up our houses and runs our appliances. The Site C project would flood 5340 hectares of a stunningly magnificent river valley, including highly productive river bottom lands and agricultural land. All so we can run our flat screen TVs, microwave ovens and video-game players.

Site C has already been the subject of intense critiques, especially amongst First Nations and Peace River residents who suffered firsthand the devastating effects of the W.A.C. Bennett dam—including huge declines in wildlife through loss of critical habitat and migration corridors, to the mercury contamination and impoundment of native migratory fish in the reservoirs.

As with Three Gorges and earlier phases of the Peace River dams, communities were relocated and traditional hunting and fishing areas and sacred sites were flooded. Like the Three Gorges dam, compensation for the first dam wasn’t forthcoming. BC has only marginally compensated surviving members of Fort Ware and Ingenika Point. Most of the victims, the Tsay Keh Dene people of the Kwadacha First Nation, have argued that there is no compensation for destroying vast river valley systems, water quality, wildlife corridors and their cultural traditions tied to that river.

BC Hydro argues that this is a climate action strategy to generate “clean” energy, but data, even from their own engineers, suggests that the carbon and climate benefits aren’t there. First, there is the loss of all the carbon stored in the forest and soil which will be released when they are logged, excavated and flooded, coupled with the lost opportunity thereafter for that sink to capture carbon. And when you factor in the release of methane, a highly concentrated greenhouse gas with 21 times the impact of carbon dioxide (from rotting vegetation bubbling up through the waters), the argument that dams offset fossil fuel emissions for equivalent energy starts losing its potency. In a well-documented 1995 case study of a dam in Brazil, researchers found that there were more greenhouse gases produced by the dam than would have been released through fossil fuels to generate an equivalent amount of energy. Critics also argue that the power generated by Site C will mostly be sold to the US, rather than addressing provincial energy needs.

Site C is now into Stage 3—the environmental and regulatory review phase of the planning process. Back in September, the launch of Stage 3 was met by over a thousand protesters coming in convoys from northeast BC to the provincial Legislature, including some of the original elderly victims who spoke of the impacts of the first dam. Everywhere there were signs asking British Columbians to “Keep the Peace” and “Say No to Site C.” All the First Nations in the region, groups like the Peace Valley Environment Association, Citizens United to Save the Peace, Sierra Club of BC and Suzuki Foundation have all come out against the project. BC Hydro is stating that they “have a duty to consult and, where appropriate,
accommodate Aboriginal groups.” Given BC Hydro’s past, it seems reasonable to question its ability to be the arbiter of what is appropriate accommodation of aboriginal groups.

In China, long-time Chinese critic and journalist Dai Qing, who went to jail for editing and publishing the landmark report Yangtze! Yangtze! with independent scientists in 1988, has always argued that very small energy projects are far less costly on all fronts than mega-dams. Now 70, Qing is dismissive of her government’s claims that it can resolve the many problems with the Three Gorges Dam. “The government built a dam but destroyed a river…My role is to dig out what really happened and tell the truth to my reader.”

Keepers Healing Walk June 25, 2011

Brian Deheer sent the following letter. “I want to pass on my thanks and congratulations for the Healing Walk this past Saturday. I was very happy to be able to participate in such a powerful event. It made a strong impression on me, to be able to walk past the plants and tailings ponds, to see, hear and smell first-hand the impacts of this huge industry. I appreciate the efforts of the Keepers of the Athabasca and the Sierra Club - Prairie Region in organizing

July, 2011, Newsletter
this event, and look forward to future events and efforts from both of your organizations. I was impressed to see the broad range of people attending, including elders and children, male & female, aboriginal and non-aboriginal, local and non-local. I noticed there were lots of folks who came from farther away than I did (Lac La Biche, 3 hrs drive), not only from other parts of Alberta, such as Edmonton and Cold Lake, for instance, but also from Saskatchewan, interior BC, Vancouver, and even Portland Oregon. And I was impressed by the amount of organizing involved; this was no small achievement: a pipe ceremony, t-shirts, RCMP road support, the feast -- this all takes lots of work. The greatest impact on me came from the feelings of camaraderie and solidarity between people on the walk, the mood that was created and shared, which included reverence for the land and for the people who have lived there for centuries, but which also included humour, celebration, warmth, and respect for all. I share the sentiments of the leaders who spoke after the feast, who talked about the seriousness of the situation, and about the need to take action to stop the pollution of the waters, air and land. They talked about the elders who have shown courage and leadership in the past, but also about the children who are growing up now in this situation, as well as the future generations. They also talked about hope, and I feel that their hopefulness was embodied in this event. I wish there was more I could do to help, and I will certainly try to do so in my own community. I look forward to participating in a similar event next year. Once again, many thanks and congratulations, well done.

Summary of the Healing Walk by Alice Martin

The second annual Keepers Healing Walk was a success for the grassroots people in the community, for it was a focus on the grassroots people coming together to walk for the Healing of Mother Earth and for the people of the land. The 2011 Healing Walk was not about making a big splash in the paper but about building stronger alliances with the people of the land in coming together to talk about Healing and what it means to all the different walks of life.

The aboriginal people came from the four directions to provide support through their participation in joining the people of this region in their quest to send a message to the greater public in creating greater awareness to the damage that is being done to mother earth. This message also included the healing that needed to be done between the people in coming together in solidarity, respecting the different ways that the aboriginal people chose to show their way of taking action in protecting mother earth that would enable the group to work in a way that showed respect for all people that were there to participate.
The people came to participate wanted to be with others of like mind and spirit that were committed in taking action to participate and contribute in the Healing of Mother Earth. One of the five First Nation Chiefs, Steve Courtoreille was there to lead the Walk with the MCFN Staff. Gitz was also there with his staff to lead the walk as a Youth Representative.

The walk started later because of the rain but this did not stop the group. A pipe ceremony was held at the Friendship Center with the group and then everyone drove to Crane Lake Park as designated to be the starting point of the walk.

People like Rod from Cold Lake spoke before the walk and it was seen how his words touched the people that were present. MCFN Chief, Steve Courtoreille also shared his desire to provide support for the Healing of Mother Earth and for the people who are impacted by the destruction that is being done to the land, the people and our way of life. Clay was the MC for the walk and he was also instrumental in keeping the Peace and high spirits with the People. Melina also spoke and her words touched the hearts of the people in a way that sent a message of confidence and hope for solidarity.

Elder, Lillian Shirt was also instrumental in how she moved the people with her teachings and stories. A women pipe holder gave the people the sense of a mother being there to walk with the people in their quest for healing among themselves and for Mother Earth.

A follow-up Feast at Friendship Center was a place for the people to rest and visit before they went on their way to their own lives. The food was excellent and thanks to the cooks, Doug, Chico and Celina. It was a time to come together, share their thoughts on the walk, and think about next year.

It can be said that the walk was a success in a way that focused on the people who came together in solidarity to support one another and to generate a rekindled sense of ‘relationship’. It was evident that the people who were present had different ways of taking action, and how these people were able to accept one another’s ways was clearly a significant accomplishment.

This 2011 walk can be seen as the milestone for rebuilding ‘relationship’ among the people of the land and how the community of Fort McMurray worked in honour, pride and respect with one another.
"Whether it's the Alberta tar sands or our role in Haiti, The Dominion has the guts to look at Canada without the fairytales about our national virtue that comfort and blind us... Only readers like you can keep this crucial voice alive and growing louder. Please, pitch in!" --Naomi Klein

FORT MCMURRAY, AB—In the face of the enormous devastation that is destroying forests across northern Alberta, a peaceful group of people are steadfastly asserting the need to heal the land and waters. On June 25, 2011, the second annual Healing Walk for the Tar Sands brought together Indigenous people, Keepers of the Athabasca, elders, children and supporters, who walked 13 kilometers through the heart of where Syncrude and Suncor extract bitumen on a massive scale. Bitumen, a tar-like substance that holds petroleum, sits below what the industry, in an Orwellian turn, calls “overburden”—not forest.

The destruction we saw is so vast it goes far beyond the visible horizon. The urgent need for healing is evident to anyone who visits this barren expanse. People from many places came to support and join in—including activists who participated with Zapatista Indigenous communities and the movement in Oaxaca, Mexico. Together they chanted, “Zapata vive! La lucha sigue!”

The Healing Walk for the Tar Sands was led by elders such as Lillian, a Cree woman, and Violet, an 83-year-old elder and the oldest woman in the community of Fort McMurray First Nation. These elder women possess a wonderful sense of humor and sharp minds, and with other elders, guided the traditional prayers, smudge and ceremonies. This walk faced the enormity of the land stolen from Indigenous peoples that is now destroyed, lifeless, and empty save for ugly scarecrows called “bit-u-men” to keep out the birds from its poisoned soil. Horrid continuous booms from sound cannons scare the birds from landing in the enormous reservoirs of toxic waste. We marched beside the machinery of destruction, the surreal gigantic Tonka trucks, cranes and pipes. The air pollution, a putrid stench, gave a headache to many of the people who participated in the healing walk.
Participants stop along the route of the second annual Tar Sands Healing Walk, June 2011. Colonization is not a thing of the past; it materializes today in the increased rates of cancer in people who live downstream from the tar sands.

The day was rainy with occasional bursts of sun, but the walkers were not deterred by the weather. A couple walkers had brought protective dust masks, remembering how terrible they felt last year after the six-hour walk, their lungs absorbing toxic dust from the tar sands. However, it was not appealing to wear wet masks so we continued, mostly mask-less, through the rain along the shoulder of Highway 63, accompanied by a heavy police presence.

This walk was started by people heartbroken by what has happened to their traditional homelands. One of the organizers, Cleo Reece, helped to start the Memorial March for the Murdered and Missing Women when she lived in Vancouver years ago. She spoke of the murdered and missing waters in northern Alberta: an eerie, disturbing connection between the violence against Indigenous women and against Indigenous land. Colonization is not a thing of the past; it continues today in virulent, violent forms and materializes in the increased rates of cancer found in communities downstream from the tar sands. Resistance and commitment to peace also continue, as they have for the past 500-plus years. This is a form of power that is based in love for community, a community of the living that includes not just people, but bears, eagles, rivers, wind and forests. It is a deeply humble, peaceful power that stands in ethical contrast to the forms of power that greedily exploit and forcefully violate the land and those who live on it. It is a power that cannot be bought or sold because it is freely shared, residing in a respect and a grief for the land that gives us life.

We began and ended the day at the Nistawoyou Friendship Center in Fort McMurray where a feast for the walkers had been prepared by a chef with a joyful laugh and a team of dedicated volunteers. At the closing circle, Cree Elder Lillian Shirt was presented with tobacco in gratitude for her leading the day’s ceremonies, and she shared with us stories of survival and creativity.

We learned a lot from the tar sands healing walk and from visiting the surrounding Indigenous families, some who live in crowded old trailers, accessible by unpaved, muddy roads. The living conditions on some of the reserves are not unlike those in poor communities in Latin America.

Where are the economic benefits of the tar sands to these communities? What have they gained from these industrial projects? Witnessing the poverty, health problems and environmental destruction in person helped us respond to these questions. A huge economic gap remains between the living standards of Caucasian and Indigenous communities. Indigenous communities are marginalized in Canadian politics and are fighting institutional racism as their long-term interests are undermined.

On the walk, an elder weighed the cost of lost culture, water and foods and asked what all this destruction has been for. The question points to the global interests that have developed the Alberta tar sands in order to sustain a privileged way of life for some at the expense of others. We had travelled from Vancouver, a landscape dramatically different from the tar sands wasteland but which is nonetheless endangered by the latter's economic grip on land. Our Pacific Coast is threatened by proposed pipelines, with their inevitable spills, and a rapid increase in tanker traffic. In an era of climate change, those of us who live in urban centers cannot afford the disconnect between our cities that reap the temporary benefits of this destruction and the Indigenous homelands that have been desecrated. Through global waters, winds, and ethical
human relations, we are linked with the people who are witnessing the eradication of their boreal forests, traditional hunting grounds and once-pristine waters.

On the edge of the dead land and toxic reservoirs, wild flowers, forests and Indigenous families live in trailer homes. Life here is simple, humble and warm, filled with good humour and jokes. Inside, Indigenous artwork on the walls portrays wolves, traditional carvings and pictures of ancestors and grandchildren. In this community, women, men, children, young people and elders resist their displacement and speak up about the destruction of their land, water and wildlife.

“Giving up is not an option,” said Dene Suline Elder Warrior Brian Grandbois from Cold Lake, Alberta. Brian’s community is struggling to protect Berry Point at English Bay in Cold Lake, the land where they hold ceremonies and sacred burials, smoke fish and gather medicinal plants. This sacred land is threatened to become an RV park by ministerial order. Indigenous peoples of the area have set up their peace protection camp with tipis, tents and campfires, even though police are pressuring them to leave. Colonialism, Eurocentrism, and capitalism are killing Indigenous peoples, destroying our planet, La Pachamama—our Mother Earth.

That the pollution from tar sands extraction projects has spread to affect the waters of the Athabasca River and Fort Chipewyan is no secret. Beginning in the 1990s, these waters became unsafe to drink, and people are sick as a result of their toxicity. These polluted waters empty into the Arctic. This is a fact of hydrology. Tar sands pollution as a source of acid rain in Saskatchewan is a meteorological certainty. Airborne pollutants are also reported to be concentrating in lake water in neighboring Saskatchewan, reducing the availability of certain fish species.

While the ailing of these once-healthy waters is cause for alarm, corporate negligence has been responsible for at least three recent pipeline spills in Canada and the US. In July 2010, Enbridge spilled 3.1 million litres of oil into Tallmudge Creek and the Kalamazoo River, Michigan. In May 2011 in the Plains Midwest, 4.5 million liters of oil were spilled in Lubicon Lake Cree territory, the homeland of Melina Laboucan-Massimo, a young woman from the Lubicon Cree Nation who spoke eloquently at the Friendship Center. She described the horror of experiencing 28,000 barrels of oil spilling right beside her family’s homes, in the largest oil disaster in Alberta since 1975. In June 2011, Enbridge was also responsible for about 1,500 barrels spilled near Wrigley in the Northwest Territories. This last spill is said to have been kept out of waterways, but still seeped into the soil.

Horrific spills are not the only danger posed by industrial activity in Northern Alberta. In December 2010, a gushing saltwater aquifer at Shell’s Muskeg River operation raised questions about ground water contamination. This incident was preceded by another round of duck deaths in October 2010 in a Syncrude tailings reservoir. It’s a tragic irony when cultures that see water as something that comes from a tap have to learn about the interconnectedness of the earth’s waters through violent corporate operations that destroy Indigenous people’s homelands and cultures.

The Second Annual Healing Walk in Alberta’s Tar Sands was deeply inspiring. In the midst of massive greed and destruction, a community gathered to transform ground zero into a place of solidarity and social change. The call for healing is compelling, as simple and as necessary as breathing clean air and drinking clean water. The walkers shared an understanding—respect for ecological integrity must come first.

July, 2011, Newsletter
Keepers of the Athabasca in Partnership with Pembina River Watershed Council present

**KeepersWatch**

Local Edmonton Telephone Number: 780-809-0643  
Toll Free Line Telephone Number: 855-865-4321

Project Manager, Julie J Burke, Keepers of the Athbasca-Co-Chair, Pembina River Regional Watershed-Coordinator Julia-jean@live.com (780)206-6274 or (780)954-2255  
Keepers of the Athbasca, P.O. Box 1707, Athabasca, Alberta T9S-2B4  WWW.keepersoftheathbasca.ca

“Water and the land is like blood in the body. If you pollute or cut-off water, the land will die. Water is fundamental to all life and we must work together to protect it.”

Chief Charlie Football Gameti, NWT

Keepers Mission is to unite the peoples of the Athabasca River and Lake Watershed (which includes all tributaries and sub-basins) to secure and protect water and watershed lands for ecological, social, cultural and community health and well-being.

The KeepersWatch will provide an opportunity for all citizens along the Pembina River and throughout the Athabasca River and Lake Basin to address human impact issues and to work towards improving and enhancing the ecological health of the entire watershed. “KeepersWatch” toll-free Reporting hot-line Pilot has launched in the Hamlets of Fawcett and Jarvie - two small farming communities along the Pembina River, located in the MD of Westlock, Alberta.

**Challenge** It is evident now more than ever that stresses are being placed on aquatic ecosystems throughout Alberta. Due to many years of (now known) unsafe farming practices, coupled with the aggressive logging and mining practices of the past, many stretches along the Pembina River have been stripped of all native vegetation. Not only does this lead to extreme erosion, but it has left the watershed unable to deal with the amount of point source and non-point source contamination entering the river as a result of human impact.

**Solution** Part of the solution to the emerging water challenges is through community-level action to help safeguard our water sources. The KeepersWatch Program will provide citizens the opportunity to voice their concerns on the river and also provides them with the opportunity to become a part of the solution. The KeepersWatch Program will address the issues of pollution and riparian and wetland degradation, thereby working towards improving and enhancing the ecological health of the entire watershed. This program incorporates an exchange of information and knowledge among all communities within the Pembina Watershed.

**Benefits of Program** KeepersWatch will conduct regular monitoring that will help create a database showing the state of the watershed. The Pembina KeepersWatch is a community based monitoring pilot, which will be used as a model for the KeepersWatch and Whistle Blowers Hot-line throughout the Athabasca Watershed.

July, 2011, Newsletter
YOUTH COMMITTEE This project is looking for interested persons with the passion and energy to help move this project forward.

Committee Chairperson - Cody Woodward
Date Committee Formed - June 5, 2011
The following guidance document describes the purpose and structure of this committee including what it plans to achieve, who will participate, how it will do its work and when it will be achieved. It was approved to apply for financing by the Keepers of the Athabasca Watershed Council Board of Directors on: July 5, 2011

What is the purpose of this committee? To provide a framework for youth leadership development in watershed stewardship, including conservation and restoration of forest, wetlands and riparian areas, green energy and sustainable community development, and lowering our own human footprint on this earth.

What is in scope? It will target ages 14-35. This is a one year plan that will develop an adaptable framework to allow ease of repetition on a yearly basis. It includes a 2 point program starting with a minimum of 6 community visits which include a daytime school workshop and an evening community youth workshop. The year will cumulate in a 5 day cross-cultural camp, which will include, but not be limited to medicinal herbal identification and use, wilderness survival and first aid training, riparian and wetland health, personal opportunity information for lowering our human footprint and developing sustainable communities, and cross cultural celebration. Wilderness or regular first aid certification for camp mentors, possible canoe certification.

What is out of scope? Workshops and camp training will be limited to our success in finding qualified instructors. Participant numbers will be limited to 30.

What does the committee specifically plan to achieve? Youth awareness and connection to wilderness with an understanding of the necessity of watershed protection is the intent. Including the development of leadership skills and an understanding of how youth can individually and collectively make a difference. All this while developing wilderness survival skills and sustainable community knowledge.

How does the committee plan to do its work? The committee will locate and work with instructors willing to train themselves and work with the local schools in 6 communities located throughout the Athabasca River Basin. We will provide a guideline for content and ideas for instruction. The committee will locate instructors, staff and mentors for the cross cultural camp and help them to achieve the necessary police check, wilderness or regular first aid and other necessary training. The committee will arrange for the location, food and travel for participants and camp personal. Also the committee will determine a selection process for participants.

CORE TEAM: Julie Burke (Pembina River), Peggy Lucy (Big Bend), Cindy Coates (Pembina River), Cody Woodward (Anzac)

July, 2011, Newsletter
Environmental Leaders Encourage Civil Disobedience To Stop Keystone XL Pipeline
by Beth Buczyński, July 2, 2011. The following article appeared in care2 (the campaign on the Whitehouse begins in mid-August)

Last week, eleven veterans of the environmental movement issued an open letter to Canadians and Americans inviting them to participate in a massive public protest of the proposed Keystone XL pipeline expansion. The letter’s signatories, which include David Suzuki, Bill McKibben, Wendell Berry and climate scientist James Hansen, (editors note: other Canadians include Maude Barlow and George Poitras) say that the time has come to move from letter writing and petition signing to something that’s more likely to get the government’s attention: civil disobedience at the nation’s capital. The invitation can be read in its entirety at tarsandsaction.org, but here are a few choice excerpts (emphasis and links added):

As you know, the planet is steadily warming: 2010 was the warmest year on record, and we’ve seen the resulting chaos in almost every corner of the earth. And as you also know, our democracy is increasingly controlled by special interests interested only in their short-term profit. These two trends collide this summer in Washington, where the State Department and the White House have to decide whether to grant a certificate of ‘national interest’ to some of the biggest fossil fuel players on earth. These corporations want to build the so-called ‘Keystone XL Pipeline’ from Canada’s tar sands to Texas refineries.

The pipeline crosses crucial areas like the Oglalla Aquifer where a spill would be disastrous—and though the pipeline companies insist they are using “state of the art” technologies that should leak only once every 7 years, the precursor pipeline and its pumping stations have leaked a dozen times in the past year. These local impacts alone would be cause enough to block such a plan. But the Keystone Pipeline would also be a fifteen hundred mile fuse to the biggest carbon bomb on the continent, a way to make it easier and faster to trigger the final overheating of our planet, the one place to which we are all indigenous.

And Secretary of State Clinton has already said she’s ‘inclined’ to recommend the pipeline go forward. Partly it’s because of the political commotion over high gas prices, though more tar sands oil would do nothing to change that picture. But it’s also because of intense pressure from industry. The US Chamber of Commerce—a bigger funder of political campaigns than the RNC and DNC combined—has demanded that the administration “move quickly to approve the Keystone XL pipeline,” which is not so surprising—they’ve also told the U.S. EPA that if the planet warms that will be okay because humans can ‘adapt their physiology’ to cope. The Koch Brothers, needless to say, are also backing the plan, and may reap huge profits from it.

This won’t be a one-shot day of action. We plan for it to continue for several weeks, till the administration understands we won’t go away. Not all of us can actually get arrested—half the signatories to this letter live in Canada, and might well find our entry into the U.S. barred. But we will be making plans for sympathy demonstrations outside Canadian consulates in the U.S., and U.S. consulates in Canada—the decision-makers need to know they’re being watched. Twenty years of patiently explaining the climate crisis to our leaders hasn’t worked. Maybe moral witness will help. You have to start somewhere, and we choose here and now.

Read more: http://www.care2.com/causes/environmental-leaders-encourage-civil-disobedience-to-stop-keystone-xl-pipeline.html#ixzz1R

July, 2011, Newsletter
Cold Lake Peace Camp Protestors charged with contempt of court

In May, members of Cold Lake First Nations set up a camp to protest the development of a large RV Park on traditional hunting and gathering land. Cold Lake First Nations (CLFN) members and other protestors have rotated on and off at the camp since it began, saying proper consultation has not taken place. CLFN council won a legal victory to have an injunction placed upon the construction, discussion of the campsite's expansion is now set to be discussed before the court next year. As part of this injunction the court ordered the protestors to remove part of their camp from the disputed park. The protestors have ignored court orders to leave the site. The roads are not barricaded any anyone wishing to use the park my do so. Cold Lake First Nations Chief Janvier supports the cause the protestors are fighting for, but he wants them to leave the land and follow the court's order. The document names eight protestors, including Allen and Harvey Scanie, who remained at the camp after the June 7 deadline. Harvey plans to take the case of civil contempt of court up to a United Nations tribunal and will use this case as a springboard to attempt to bring up the whole of Cold Lake First Nation's lost traditional lands, which extend past the Cold Lake Air Weapons Range to the north. The contempt of court hearing was heard in an Edmonton court on July 26 at 1 p.m.

The RV Park construction is held off at least a year when Alberta will again engage in litigation next June. Meanwhile there is very restricted access to the campground, with Traditional Dene Suline apparently having to ask the Alberta govt (via the Band Council) permission before entering the camp to pick berries or catch and smoke fish. A few structures are allowed to remain, including the teepee and the sacred fire. The port-a-potties, kitchen and other camp necessities have to go. The public access road to the boat launch will remain open for everyone.

The specifics on the court order are still being finalized and hopefully impractical conditions of camping will be rectified. The Scanie family is back at the camp. The camp will need to fundraise to retain legal counsel for any future defense (or offense) using the court system (which undermines nation-to-nation relationship with Alberta involved and of course, inherent Indigenous Sovereignty).

Thanks to Ray H. and Rita Wong for updates on the Cold Lake Peace Camp

A letter from the Peace Camp as dictated to Duane Janvier by Harvey Scanie
Re: Update on situation at Peace Camp at Blueberry Point (Ge-eh-Hou-Che-lah).

We are the Dene Sutine tribe of the Dene Nation. Our continent is largely known as Turtle Island to most tribes. We have a culture and oral tradition that dates back over 10,000 years. We are exercising our inherent and native rights to the land. We have survived many attempts by Industry, Government and Church to extinguish our Nation, through colonization and genocide.

We are doing nothing wrong. The AB. Government is clearly doing many things wrong. They are in violation of their own rules, also federal and international laws. Currently they are violating laws such as S.A.R.A. (Species at Risk Act), D.F.O.(Department of Fisheries and Oceans), Species of Special Concern and Ducks unlimited. We need time to study the environmental impacts by the proposed parks and to
discuss the outcome. It is likely we will oppose any development. The Alberta governments actions violate almost all section of the “UN’s Declaration of Indigenous Peoples.”

Speaking of laws we are always proving ourselves to everyone. There is a new law emerging where people have to prove us wrong instead. We hear the Alberta government is trying to say we don’t follow anyone’s rules. We are a sovereign nation with our own rules. We respect natural laws too. International laws are respected. We respect the Queen of England who we signed the Peace Treaty of 1876 at Ft. Carlton. We signed a Peace treaty with Great Britain as an independent Nation!

This is why we don’t follow provincial laws. Our Elders have advised us never to listen to or make any type of agreement with the AB. Government. Besides, AB. Government doesn’t even have any legislation on how to approach or consult with the Dene Nation. The AB government is using the money they stole from selling our resources to fight us in court. That very wealth was derived from the backs of our ancestors.

This is a general letter; our situation is very complicated and emotional for us. We will write more letters.

**Upcoming Event - Keepers of the Water V August 10-14, 2011**

Northlands Denesuline Nation  
P.O. Box 120  
Lac Brochet, Manitoba  
R0B 2E0  
204-337-2270  
Conference and registration kit is $50.00 + meal plan$50.00 + accommodations $50.00 or $25.00 for tenting. Youth (12-20) and elders (60 +) registration is $25.00. You can send check or money order to the above address or pay by credit card by calling Kevin Carlson or Agnes Dantouze at 204-677-1600. Please register by August 5, 2011 or onsite fee is a flat rate of $250.00.

Keepers of the Water V is hosted by Northlands Denesuline First Nation and Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak in Lac Brochet Manitoba. This year’s conference hopes to build a model of northern water conservation and protection in Manitoba designed and implemented jointly by First nations and northern leadership, technical and academic experts as well as grassroots and northern residents.

The agenda promises to be thorough and educational and include invited guests from First Nations Leadership, Government of Canada and Manitoba Government Ministers and Members of parliament and the Manitoba Legislative Assembly as well as First Nations technical experts and academics from Manitoba and Saskatchewan post-secondary educational institutes. An Elders Summit and a Youth Summit running concurrently on opening day August 10th will develop a vision for our waters from their perspective.

For further information call Conference Chairperson- councilor Debbie Nambiennare at 204-337-2270 or Conference Coordinator Kevin Carlson at 204-677-1600. Anyone interested in traveling from Alberta with Keepers of the Athabasca please call coordinator Janice Pitman at 780-675-5251, we have a couple of spots still open

July, 2011, Newsletter