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ANALYZING THE SITE C DAM DECISION THROUGH CULTURES OF CONTROL AND CARE

Introduction

In the 1960s, British Columbia, Canada was a relatively small resource-driven economy led by Premier W.A.C Bennett whose priority was economic development (Government of British Columbia, no date). Bennett believed affordable and efficient energy would drive economic growth in the province. Large hydroelectric dams on the Peace River were key policy initiatives to achieve growth (Government of British Columbia, no date). The initial proposal was for four dams along the Peace River, with the first W.A.C Bennett dam finishing in 1967, displacing First Nations communities and disrupting biodiversity (Clarke, 2014).

This essay focuses on Site C, the third dam being built in this region which is Indigenous territory covered under Treaty 8 (Tesar, 2016). With a projected service date of 2025, Site C will provide the equivalent amount of energy to power 450,000 homes (BC Hydro, no date a).

The provincial government rejected Site C twice in the 1980s, deciding the province did not need additional electricity following hearings with the provincial utility commission, the BC Utilities Commission (BCUC) (Clarke, 2014). However, provincial utility BC Hydro a Crown corporation serving as an agent of the Crown continued to push forecasts of increased electricity needs for which Site C was required (Clarke, 2014). In 2010, the project resurfaced, being approved by the provincial government in 2014 (Clarke, 2014).

As the project involved Indigenous lands under treaty, it was highly contested and led to lengthy legal battles with First Nations.

Today, Canada generates the majority of its electricity from water given its abundance and superior efficiency compared to fossil fuel energy generation (Canadian Hydropower Association, 2008). Hydropower is seen as a sustainable and renewable energy source and a focus for "sustainable development."

However, Canada is a nation born on land that Indigenous peoples inhabited for centuries before the arrival of European settlers. Colonialism and forced assimilation are the underpinnings of Canadian society (Rahman, Anne Clarke and Byrne, 2017) which to this day frames a systemic disregard for Indigenous local knowledge (ILK) in political discourses and ecological decisions such as the Site C dam construction.

This essay will analyze the Site C dam conflict through cultures of control and care.

Meadowcroft *et al.,* (2019) describes modern understandings of the world as rooted in control to standardize and reduce complexity. Control cultures tend to focus on incumbent approaches in pursuit of "progress" rather than analyzing alternative pathways (Meadowcroft *et al.*, 2019).

Cultures of care encourage critical thinking in terms of the inextricable link between nature, humans and what shapes knowledge (De la Bellacasa, 2017). Wickson *et al.,* (2017) stress the underpinnings of care are examining power balances and narratives to understand the context of different points of view. This understanding intends to rebalance reliance on incumbent forms of assessment and scientific evidence with multistakeholder and multidisciplinary perspectives (Wickson *et al.*, 2017) providing new

approaches to decision-making to mitigate conflicts and re-establish trust. This is an important lens with which to examine this conflict as incumbent processes used for the Site C dam decision pushed the dam forward as the only option without exploring alternative pathways. In addition, the modernist focus on hydropower as a low emissions energy source has disregarded biodiversity, ILK and social impacts. Including these impacts would broaden perspectives, potentially resulting in alternative outcomes.

We will first analyze how power relations based on incumbent processes and cultures of control ignored local scale to cause conflict between actors of the Crown and Indigenous communities regarding the Site C dam. Using the STEPS methodology, we then analyze how new approaches to engaging Indigenous communities rooted in cultures of care can be used to reframe power relationships and address sources of conflict.

Affected Groups and Power Relationships in Cultures of Control

In 2010, Premier Gordon Campbell instructed BC Hydro to move the Site C dam forward (Simpson, 2010). Months later, the Clean Energy Act (CEA) created by the Campbell government followed, which exempted Site C from further regulatory review by the BCUC (Russell and Beverage, 2015). The BCUC is meant to act independently, however, it is funded by the organizations it regulates and the government can limit the commission's authority which was the case with the CEA (Office of the Auditor General of BC, 2018). By carving out regulatory review exemptions for specific projects, the CEA represented the most powerful interests, (Meadowcroft *et al.*, 2019) reinforcing the dam as the single pathway for the goal of increased "sustainable" energy capacity.

As established by court rulings, the Crown must consult with Indigenous peoples, as such, a consultation process started and followed provincial and federal environmental assessment acts (Dubrule, Dee Patriquin and Hood, 2018). Both acts are representations of bureaucracy as a mode of control (Stirling, 2019a). Essentially, the acts give the appearance of fairness by allowing Indigenous input, however, the "duty to consult" does not result in legal obligations to Indigenous peoples (Sanderson, Bergner and Jones, 2012). Both acts outline only the need to identify Indigenous concerns, the federal act limits timeframes for consultation and neither defines effective Indigenous consultation (Dubrule, Dee Patriquin and Hood, 2018).

Although several Indigenous communities were consulted, this essay focuses on Treaty 8 First Nations (T8FN). Per a review of the Indigenous consultations conducted by Dubrule, Dee Patriquin and Hood (2018) T8FN raised significant concerns about the future of the land and the impact on the people living in the region. The authors continue that T8FN felt the community concerns and impacts were minimized by narrow definitions of culture that limited considerations to specific sites rather than regional impacts.

These concerns are valid, at full capacity the reservoir surface area is 9,300 hectares, covering 5,500 hectares of land (BC Hydro, no date b). The dam further disrupts the flow of the Peace River, beyond the two previous dams, floods agricultural land, disrupts fish and bird habitats and many other adverse environmental effects that a report in a series by Bakker, Christie and Hendriks (2016) refer to as "unprecedented in the history of environmental assessments under the *Canadian Environmental Assessment Act" (p. 13).*

In this regard, provincial energy needs reliant on resource extracting from lands belonging to marginalized communities, have diminished local scale considerations such as biodiversity and ILK.

Atkins and Hope (2021) state that the sustainability of an energy source can only be determined by examining local scale including biodiversity impacts. Per (Hulme *et al.*, 2011) Indigenous peoples are best positioned to protect biodiversity through local knowledge.

By focusing on the modernity of the climate emergency which spotlights low emissions energy sources as "sustainable," we expect the minority to sacrifice their rights for the "greater good" (Leach, Scoones and Stirling, 2007), ignoring local scale and minimizing ILK. Mitigation offered by BC Hydro essentially suggested it would be easy for Indigenous Peoples to find new areas to practice their culture. This demonstrates another tool in cultures of control, disenchantment from tradition (Stirling, 2019a)

Findings by Dubrule, Dee Patriquin and Hood (2018), confirm BC Hydro's consultation approach limited their ability to obtain free prior and informed consent (FPIC) and identify rights to resources.

The dam is located on Treaty 8 territory, which was signed with the understanding that protections for traditional ways of life would be maintained and respected (Tesar, 2016). In late 2014 the provincial government approved the investment for Site C and construction began in 2015 (Clarke, 2014). However, consultations failed to determine whether the dam construction violated Indigenous treaty rights (Bakker and Christie, 2016). Legal challenges quickly arose starting with landowners and First Nations challenging the environmental approval process, resulting in civil claims by West Moberly First Nations (W.M.F.N) regarding treaty infringement (Raven, no date). The civil claim stated massive infringements such as Site C go deeply beyond the Crown's right to "take up" land from time to time for limited purposes (Bakker and Christie, 2016). In an open letter to the provincial government Chief Roland Willson from the W.M.F.N (2021) emphasized that these limited purposes do not include "large-scale destruction." Chief Wilson goes on to note the requirements under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which preserves the right to FPIC before adopting measures affecting Indigenous Peoples (United Nations, 2007).

The presumptive interpretation of the Crown's right to 'take up land' illustrates environmental governance de-prioritizing hard-won duties of accountability and transparency to Indigenous peoples in favour of established narratives regarding "sustainable energy" rather than examining plural pathways (Meadowcroft *et al.*, 2019).

Cultures of Care and Plural Pathways

By purporting development as sustainable simply given it is low carbon, sustainability remains a political process with the most powerful interests guiding the direction under a culture of control justified by climate concerns. Under these conditions "sustainability risks betraying both its foundations and its potential" (Meadowcroft *et al*., 2019, p. 234). However, the four steps of STEPS Methodology below can open up new pathways to continued energy needs by rebalancing incumbent forms of assessment with multi-stakeholder perspectives:

1) Engaging a diversity of actors
2) Exploring the narratives of these actors
3) Characterizing dynamics between actors and their narratives
4) Revealing pathways

The concept of framing is central to the STEPS approach. The views of all actors and system dynamics are shaped by interactions with knowledge acquisition, values and political processes, creating "framings" (Leach, Scoones and Stirling, 2007). Reflective analysis is required to recognize framings and

prioritize marginalized interests, acknowledging that interdisciplinary knowledge is essential to sustainable pathways (STEPS Center, no date).

Per Nguyen (2014), a 1996 report by the Office of the Auditor General of Canada found that First Nations and governments define accountability differently. Governments saw accountability as funding, while First Nations saw accountability as transparent dialogue.

This reinforces the importance of engaging actors and exploring their narratives. Had the actors involved in the decision-making regarding Site C operated with care to engage Indigenous communities and understand their framings, a deeper contextual awareness of different viewpoints would have been developed regarding their concerns.

By exploring the narratives of Indigenous communities, we would see that their cultural history values the interdependence between nature and humans with the ethical responsibility that what we do today must balance the environment for seven generations to come. In a report for the International Institute for Sustainable Development Clarkson, Morrissette and Régallet (1992) worked with Indigenous populations to examine visions for sustainable development. Their findings confirm the pain caused by colonial modernity as an "intraculture of control" causing short-sighted policies that fail to interrogate current modernist framings. By integrating ILK, the authors describe the outcome as essentially a culture based on care, with a diversity of perceptions and respect for the rights of all life to use the land and its gifts within reason. Reason means "the reality that exploiting the land to extinction would ultimately mean your own extinction" (p. 19).

Exploring narratives and characterizing the dynamics between the Crown, Indigenous communities and incorporating local scale via ILK, broadens the inputs to understanding sustainable energy. In 2017, a new provincial government that included a regulatory review of the dam in their platform was elected, a review by the BCUC was then ordered (Byers, 2017). Key concerns raised included the lack of exploring alternatives to the dam and the undervaluation of agricultural land with future potential to feed over a million people (BCUC, 2017).

BCUC (2017) notes that although other energy sources come with risks, alternatives could be equivalent to or better options than Site C. However, BC Hydro submitted that alternative energy exploration is beyond its mandate and should be left to independent power producers (BCUC, 2017, p. 153), reinforcing the 'inevitable' single trajectory mentality in cultures of control (Stirling, 2019b).

The output of the BCUC review demonstrates there was potential for exploring multiple pathways had the original Site C analysis been approached with a care approach.

Conclusion

By examining how incumbent bureaucratic processes such as utilizing the CEA to bypass regulatory review it has been demonstrated that cultures of control shaped the decision to move forward with the Site C dam. This salience of incumbency led to ignoring issues of local scale such as long-term impacts on Treaty 8 lands and Indigenous rights, culminating in conflict between powerful actors of the Crown and Indigenous communities.

Conflicts regarding hydropower and other forms of clean energy will continue unless an alternative approach to decision-making is used that re-establishes trust with Indigenous communities. Using a culture of care lens to interrogate modernist framings, the STEPS Methodology provides an alternative

approach. Using STEPS, it was demonstrated how alternative pathways could have been opened up regarding Site C dam.

In 2024, BC Hydro released a Request for Proposal for new power projects, focusing on multiple energy sources with a requirement for Indigenous ownership (BC Hydro, 2024).

This shift in direction from BC Hydro suggests slow movement away from technocracy as we begin to understand our ethical responsibilities and recognize the systemic devaluation of the resources we depend on. Increasing politicization of the term sustainability may represent the struggle for incumbent systems to maintain long-held positions of power as marginalized voices are augmented.

The cultural transformation towards new approaches to decision-making will not be easy, however, examining multiple pathways will mitigate potential future conflicts and create space for a truly sustainable future.

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