

H-Net Reviews

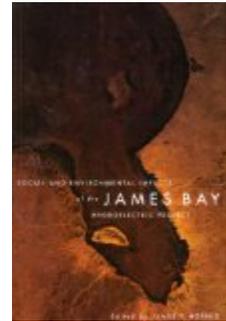
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



James F. Hornig, ed. *Social and Environmental Impacts of the James Bay Hydroelectric Project*. Montreal, Que.; Kingston, Ontario; London; Ithaca, NY: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999. xiv + 169 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7735-1837-7.

Reviewed by Joy Bilharz (Department of Sociology and Anthropology, State University of New York, College at Fredonia)

Published on H-AmIndian (June, 2000)



James Bay Revisited

This brief volume, consisting of seven chapters by authors representing a variety of disciplines, is an attempt to depoliticize the debate over the James Bay Hydroelectric Project and focus instead on an analysis of the available data. None of the authors has apparently been an active participant in issues relating to the James Bay Project, although all have experience in the Canadian north. Using the perspectives of political science, ecology, toxicology, anthropology, biology, art, and economics, the book jacket promises to "examine the issues of the controversy in relation to both the James Bay and other large hydroelectric projects, such as the Aswan Dam in Egypt and the Three Gorges Dam in China." The book instead demonstrates that the effects of the Canadian project cannot be generalized to other countries or environmental zones.

The James Bay Project, initiated in 1971, was designed to produce electricity for Canada as well as for export to the United States. Originally designed to consist of three phases, only the La Grande portion has reached near completion, creating nine major dams, thirty-seven generating stations, and thousands of kilometers of transmission lines. This phase represents 67% of the projected total area to be flooded if the project is completed and 57 percent of the projected power generation. The second, Grande Baleine or Great Whale, was placed on hold in 1994 amid protests by Crees and Inuits as well as U.S. environmental groups such as Greenpeace and the Audubon Society. The third, Nottaway-Boadback-

Rupert, presumably lies even further in the future, if indeed there is to be any continuation of the project. Canada is the world's leading producer of hydroelectric power, seen by many as a more environmentally friendly form of power production than the burning of fossil fuels or the use of nuclear energy. Opponents have argued that the negative effects on the 5000-6000 Crees who lived in the area in 1971 (12,000 by 1995) have been ignored and that the long-term environmental effects of a massive project in the taiga are unknown.

Chapter one, by political scientist Oran Young, and chapter two, by economist Stanley Warner and ecologist Raymond Coppinger, are the strongest in the book and present a solid introduction to the issues and the context in which they have developed. Young notes that Canada is struggling with two issues, the future roles of Quebec and First Nations (surprisingly this phrase does not appear in the book, perhaps reflecting the fact that only one of the authors is Canadian) and their status as separate societies, and the project has proved to be a major political battleground on which these issues take center stage. Although he is wrong in stating that there are no workable models for social impact assessment (p. 11) (see Scudder and Colson 1982; Cernea 1997; Scudder 1997), he makes an important contribution in pointing out how the framing of the debate has moved from conflicts of interest, in which bargaining and compromise are possible, to conflicts of rights which are seen as matters of principle permitting no compromise. Coppinger and Warner treat

briefly with the alliances between the Crees and U.S.-based environmental organizations (and the lack of these by the Inuits), an aspect that demands a more in-depth field-based analysis. The same authors consider the environmental effects of other Canadian hydro projects and their implications for James Bay. They note that while there have been measurable impacts on certain species, nearly all of these are at the margin of their range in this area and are not endangered.

B. D. Roebuck's analysis of elevated mercury levels resulting from reservoir construction is a concise and useful description although the raw data collected by the James Bay Mercury Committee is not available and much of the analysis has lacked peer review. Unfortunately, the issue of the effects of the belief that a culturally important food source has been poisoned is mentioned only in the conclusion. Warner's study of the social impact notes the ways in which the project has benefitted the Crees as well as the negative impacts. Adrian Tanner contrasts the positions taken by the Crees and Inuits during the La Grande and Grande Baleine phases in an interesting contribution that would have been greatly enhanced by field research that focused on this issue. The final chapter by Kesler Woodward, an artist, examines the difficulties faced by Crees in developing an arts and crafts industry as a means of generating income by taking advantage of greater access to outsiders.

The authors agree that the most serious social and environmental effects result from the construction of roads rather than dams, though it seems inappropriate to separate these out as secondary effects. While the book succeeds in taking the James Bay debate to a less polemical

arena, it is seriously flawed by the total absence of native voices. Chapters by Cree and Inuit participants would provide a welcome insight. Mary Fadden Arquette (DVM, PhD) at Akwesasne could have addressed both the scientific and social issues involved from a native perspective. It is also unfortunate that much of the material is based on secondary sources rather than long-term field research. The book is strongest in presenting the environmental issues in their political contexts and significantly weaker in dealing with the social and cultural issues involved. Future studies that incorporate Cree and Inuit perspectives and examine more deeply the social issues alluded to in this volume are necessary.

Bibliography

Cernea, Michael M. 1997. The Risks and Reconstruction Model for Resettling Displaced Populations. *World Development* 25(10): 1569-1588.

Scudder, Thayer. 1997. Resettlement. In *Water Resources: Environmental Planning, Management, and Development*, ed. Asit K. Biswas, 667-710. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Scudder, Thayer, and Elizabeth Colson. 1982. From Welfare to Development: A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of Dislocated People. In *Involuntary Migration and Resettlement: The Problems and Responses of Dislocated People*, ed. Art Hansen and Anthony Oliver-Smith, 267-287. Boulder, Colo.: Westview.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-amindian>

Citation: Joy Bilharz. Review of Hornig, James F., ed., *Social and Environmental Impacts of the James Bay Hydroelectric Project*. H-AmIndian, H-Net Reviews. June, 2000.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4235>

Copyright © 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.