

Waswanipi Cree Model Forest: a case study
GEOG 403 – Aboriginal Geography

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ABSTRACT

Since much of the first four years of the Waswanipi Cree Model Forest was marked by difficulties, there is a great deal to be explored. The structure and operation during the first four years of the Model Forest was quite standard, but some interesting developments occurred to tackle problems as they arose and some modest success was experienced. However, the changes made up to this point were not enough to fully meet the needs of this unique venture. Moreover, because of the many struggles encountered during this period, few benefits were achieved. Nonetheless, on the table now are many suggested and proposed changes to the Model Forest, and as a result great potential exists for learning about cross-cultural partnerships with First Nations, about building capacity in remote regions, and about improving community participation.

INTRODUCTION

When a new government program is initiated there is often much excitement and press about the possibilities. The reality is that often many problems are encountered. For the Waswanipi Cree Model Forest (WCMF) this was certainly the case; the first four years of its operation were thwarted by many difficulties. This case study will show that, despite such difficulties, great potential still may be realized, and in the coming years, perhaps even greater gains can be achieved from this venture than were originally expected.

This case study will describe the background of the Waswanipi Cree Model Forest. The structure and operation during the first four years will also be presented. The final section and possibly the most important one, will contain a discussion of the

successes and problems that were encountered by the WCMF during its first years of operation.

The community of Waswanipi was established in its present location after the James Bay and Northern Québec Agreement was signed in 1975. It is situated approximately 600 kilometers northwest of Québec City (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 - Location of the Waswanipi Cree Model Forest



Source: The Canadian Model Forest Network Web Site
(http://www.modelforest.net/e/home/_cana_/waswanie.html)

While the community is isolated from major centres, the location was chosen in the hope that community members could take part in the expanding natural resource industry of the region. However, for about the first twenty years, while forestry activity increased on the Waswanipi land base, the community did not experience the economic benefits. This was mostly due to the fact that the land was used for wood harvesting with little or no value-added activities taking place (“Proposal” 2002).

During the 1990’s the importance of receiving greater value from the land became increasingly evident. In 1997 a sawmill was opened in Waswanipi. The sawmill is a joint venture by Mishtuk Corporation (a Cree-owned forest management company) and Domtar Inc., together creating Nabakatuk Forest Products. The sawmill now employs at least 60 full-time workers and has provided numerous benefits for the community

(Dionne; “Solutions” 1998). Today, the importance of ensuring efficient and effective land-use, and thus, the success and growth of the sawmill, is as pertinent as ever in Waswanipi.

Clearly the WCMF can play a major role in this regard, but it was not created for this purpose alone. The impetus for an Aboriginal model forest was a 1994 report from the Standing Committee on Natural Resources. The report held that First Nations did not play a large enough role in the program, and recommended expanding the Model Forest Program¹ to include an Aboriginal model forest (“Proposal” 2002; Foothills Model Forest).

In January 1997, following an assessment of the need for First Nations involvement, Aboriginal Model Forest Proposal Guidelines was published, and six bands submitted project proposals. The Model Forest Selection Committee unanimously selected the proposal from Waswanipi. Of particular interest in the Waswanipi application was the use of traditional trapline management practices in sustainable forest management (Solutions, 1998). In September 1997, an agreement between the Chief of Waswanipi Band Council and the federal Minister of Natural Resources formally created the Waswanipi Cree Model Forest. In 1998 the Waswanipi Cree Model Forest began operation with responsibility for an area of 210,000 hectares (Foothills Model Forest; “Evaluation” 2002).²

¹ The Canadian Forest Service established the Model Forest Program in 1992. A total of 10 model forests exist as of 2003. The forests are operated by locally based partnerships and each model forest attempts to represent the key forest use values of both individuals and organizations in the local area (“Canada’s First Aboriginal Model Forest”, 1997).

² See Appendix B in regards to recent change to the size of the WCMF.

STRUCTURE AND OPERATION

Structure

In the Waswanipi Cree Model Forest proposal, five basic goals were outlined. Three main goals for the WCMF included 1) establishing and maintaining a permanent Cree harmonization table, 2) ensuring a community controlled forestry industry, and 3) supporting the traditional Cree trapline system. Two additional goals were 4) ensuring that the environmental certification process undertaken by industry had the needs of the Cree in mind and 5) developing a technology transfer plan that promoted the Cree vision³.

Despite these original goals, the actual main objectives under which the WCMF operated during its first four years differed to a large degree. These objectives are summarized in the Natural Resource Canada WCMF Evaluation Report (2002) as the following (1-2):

Objective 1: To assure the long term viability of the Cree traditional ecosystem management system (trapline system) by developing experimental harmonization measures with our industrial partners and establishing harmonization guidelines that will support the land capacity to sustain the Cree traditional way of life.

Objective 2: To implement a community-endorsed management strategy based on evaluation of past management practices and on the traditional ecological knowledge of the Crees.

Objective 3: To implement a communication and technology transfer plan which promotes the Cree vision, shares results and findings of the Waswanipi Cree Model Forest and transmits relevant information and expertise pertinent to sustainable management of traplines to other Aboriginal communities.

Objective 4: To protect cultural geography and develop a technique to identify ecosystems, cultural sites, wildlife habitats and sensitive areas of importance to Aboriginal communities and the Cree way of life. To map Cree land uses significant to the community and preserve or enhance habitats of wildlife species of importance for Cree subsistence.

Objective 5: To develop and test a suite of indicators of sustainable forest management (for Cree trapline viability) and assess the compatibility of selected forestry practices with the resource needs and vision of the Cree community.

³ “Backrouder” 1997

In reality, the WCMF was only able to focus on the first two goals. The other three received very little attention. This was out of necessity because of the struggles the Model Forest encountered. The WCMP executive decided that it would be better to try to make significant gains in certain key areas, rather than foundering in all aspects (“Evaluation” 2002).

The WCMF operated with a conventional organizational structure. The model forest proposal had called for a fourteen member Board of Directors, but this was expanded to twenty-six. The majority of voting members had to be Cree. The Board was responsible for the overall direction of the Model Forest, with duties such as staffing, project selection, budgeting and conflict resolution. For quorum to be achieved a minimum of seven voting members had to be present and a majority of voting members had to be First Nations (“Evaluation” 2002).

However, this full Board of Directors had problems. It faced difficulties created by language and cultural differences, and also struggled to get everyone to meet in the remote community of Waswanipi. Together this made the operation of the full Board of Directors difficult and cumbersome. To tackle this problem an Executive Committee was formed. It comprised twelve members of the Board. The committee met five to six times annually and performed much of the Board’s duties. Further to this, a three to four member Management Committee was established. Membership was open to anyone, but the Committee was solely Cree. Its purpose was to oversee the administrative operation and to bring proposals to the Executive Committee (“Evaluation” 2002).

The actual operational staff of the Model Forest was very small, consisting of only three positions: general manager, secretary, and project specialist. The general manager was a non-voting member of the Board of Directors (“Evaluation” 2002). The

vision under which the staff and the Model Forest as a whole operated was “to maintain and enhance the quality of EEYOU ATCHEE⁴ territory to benefit Aboriginal people and all users [...] and to assure a viable economic, social and cultural development of the First Nation of Waswanipi and the other users” (“Backgrounder” 1997).

Of course in an organization such as a model forest, it is the work and contribution of partners that largely determines the overall success. Yet, willing partners are not always easy to come by and it can be an even greater challenge to ensure they are able to contribute in a meaningful way. For the WCMF, these realities are especially true.

The partnerships developed by the WCMF have changed over time. Some of the original partners included the National Aboriginal Forestry Association (NAFA), Regroupement d’Écologistes de Val d’Or et Environs (REVE), and other First Nation communities (“Proposal” 2002).

Recent information regarding the partners of the Model Forest reveals significant needed changes. The current Cree partners are: Cree First Nation of Waskaganish, Waswanipi Trapline/Forestry Department, Grand Council of the Cree, Cree School Board and Nabakatuk Forest Products. The current non-Cree partners are: the Faculty of Forestry of Laval University, NAFA, Société de la faune et des parcs (FAPAQ)⁵ and Tembec⁶ (“Proposal” 2002).

Furthermore, the WCMF has coordinated to a certain extent with other interested parties. Most notably of these is Mishtuk Corporation, which has been granted 52,000 hectares of land within the Model Forest on which to harvest wood (“Proposal” 2002).

⁴ This is a large portion of traditional Cree territory in this region of Québec. The term can be translated as “the land of the Cree” (Backgrounder, 1997).

⁵ FAPAQ’s mission is to oversee the conservation and development of wildlife and wildlife habitats. Further information can be found at: http://www.fapaq.gouv.qc.ca/en/organisa/societe_A.htm

⁶ Tembec is a major forest products company. For further information consult: <http://www.tembec.com/>

Therefore, working closely with Mishtuk is essential for expanding the economic base of the community of Waswanipi. Support from the WCMF has come in the form of assistance with improving sustainable forest management.

Operation

The administration of the Waswanipi Cree Model Forest, including all Board of Director meetings, takes place entirely in Waswanipi itself. This presents many problems such as travel difficulties, high costs for staffing, partnership issues, and various other complications associated with remote locations.

The Board of Directors attempts to make decisions by consensus, but decisions are made by majority vote if necessary (“Evaluation” 2002). Voting becomes necessary in large part due to the current system of governance where meetings are difficult and infrequent, and as such the time needed to achieve consensus simply does not exist.

The 210,000 ha for which the WCMF is responsible includes 52 traditional Cree traplines. These traplines are each managed by a tallyman, who “allocates rights to hunt, trap and fish on the trapline” (“Evaluation” 2002, 7). The importance of the traplines cannot be understated. They provide employment for approximately 70% of the Waswanipi Cree (“Evaluation” 2002). However, the 1975 James Bay Northern Quebec Agreement created the overarching land-tenure system in this region:

1. Category IA: 36,500 ha transferred from the Province of Quebec to the federal government for the exclusive use and benefit of Cree bands.
2. Category IB: 23,300 ha on which surface rights and specified municipal powers were transferred from the Province of Quebec to a Cree corporation (Waswanipi Mishtuk Corp.)
3. Category II: Lands under provincial jurisdiction on which the Crees have exclusive rights to hunting, trapping and fishing.
4. Category III: Lands under provincial jurisdiction on which the Crees have exclusive rights to trapping of fur-bearing species

(“Evaluation” 2002, 6-7)

Funding for the Model Forest comes from a variety of sources. It is difficult to determine exact details because financial recording was not comprehensive, especially the tracking of in-kind support. Natural Resources Canada provides core funding and the provincial government, through the forest research program, also provides significant funding. The Cree First Nation of Waswanipi contributes by paying for a secretary position. Beyond this funding, support from partners has been very limited (“Evaluation” 2002; “Proposal” 2002).

There have been various efforts to involve the community of Waswanipi in the Model Forest. Community involvement is necessary for *Objective 2* (community-endorsed management strategy) to be met. Consequently, under this direction, several projects were developed to support the Waswanipi Trapline Forestry Department, thus involving the most important economic element of the community (“Evaluation” 2002). Communication is a key component to increasing community involvement; however, during the first few years, little time or money was available or directed toward communication efforts.

An important function and benefit of model forests is research projects. The research program met with modest success early on; however, the WCMF were concerned that not enough of the projects had non-Cree involvement and this would in turn limit the credibility and viability of the WCMF program. To prevent this from occurring, the Model Forest implemented research protocols to ensure and expand Cree/non-Cree research partnerships. The WCMF hoped that by expanding research partners, this would also help with the transfer of information (“Evaluation” 2002).

BENEFITS AND SUCCESSES

The fact that the Waswanipi Cree Model Forest faced some serious obstacles during this difficult first phase is evident from the issues described so far. Nevertheless, there were some successes, albeit modest ones, which proved to be important and valuable.

One key success was that the Model Forest itself was able to survive despite all the many obstacles it encountered. This was in large part due to the extreme dedication of the first General Manager. As stated in the Natural Resources Canada Evaluation Report (2002), “without her persistence and belief in the Waswanipi Cree Model Forest [...] the forest may well have ceased to function” (10).

Beyond maintenance of the program, the first actual benefit of the Model Forest was to help improve the forest management planning process for Mishtuk/Nabakatuk. Various projects undertaken in this regard yielded results, such as an ecological map of the area and an assessment of the post-fire regeneration of the land (“Proposal” 2002).

While communication difficulties are a problem faced by the WCMF, in one aspect there has been success. Despite the great challenges faced due to language and translation problems, the Model Forest has been able to effectively “communicate issues regarding sustainable forest management to a Cree audience” (“Proposal” 2002, 3). This success is even more significant when it is remembered that sustainable forest management is an objective of the Model Forest.

An interesting benefit is that the Model Forest expanded its influence to neighbouring Cree communities and to land outside of the designated land base. This effort was undertaken mainly because the 210,000 hectares given to the WCMF did not correspond to traditional territory and traplines. The expansion occurred through the

Model Forest encouraging families outside the designated area to become involved in the project. Expansion also occurred because partners allowed projects on their own timber management land base. However, due to financial constraints, the Model Forest was not able to accomplish much in this expanded territory. Therefore, yet again, it is evident just how much the WCMF depends on its partners for financial and in-kind assistance (“Proposal” 2002).

BARRIERS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The barriers and problems faced by the Waswanipi Cree Model Forest certainly outweigh the accomplishments. This is not intended to take away from what has been achieved, but rather makes the successes more significant. It is necessary to closely examine the barriers faced, and from this, look at changes the WCMF should make or is already planning to implement.

Capacity

It is very expensive to staff the Model Forest due to the high cost of living in Waswanipi. The WCMF was unable to match the pay scale and benefits of local employers and as a result, had significant difficulty attracting staff. This cannot be expressed better than by the fact that there were seventeen staffing changes among the three positions at the Model Forest in the first four years of operation. Since May 2000, the position of forestry coordinator has not been filled (“Proposal” 2002; “Evaluation Report” 2002).⁷

⁷ As a result this position was not listed in the list of the operational staff given in the “Structure” section of the case study. This position was also not mentioned in the *Natural Resources Canada Evaluation Report*.

Human resource capacity will remain a major obstacle, as there are no obvious immediate solutions. Recruiting directly from the community of Waswanipi is unlikely. The Evaluation Report (2002) suggests that possibly fewer than ten people in Waswanipi have the expertise needed to staff the Model Forest and these people are already employed in other positions. Consequently, creative solutions need to be found. As a short-term solution, recruiting students from post-secondary First Nations programs would help. A superior solution would be for the WCMF and the Cree School Board to work together to enroll selected students in appropriate post-secondary programs, on the condition they return to Waswanipi to work (“Evaluation Report” 2002). This is a long-term solution, but it does have great potential.

Additionally, the Model Forest has proposed an interesting change to staffing that may help solve capacity issues. The idea is to alter the administrative structure by creating the position of *Training and Mentoring Coordinator*. This person would be the link to the Cree School Board and would be able to work directly on identifying and solving capacity issues (“Proposal” 2002).

Community Involvement

Due to the fact that an external consultant created the proposal for the Waswanipi Cree Model Forest, a lack of community involvement and commitment existed from the very beginning. The result of this was suspicion of the Model Forest and even some opposition from within the community. Much effort was directed to correcting this problem, and there has been some success. To improve community relations, the program was modified to the satisfaction of the community and the Model Forest worked to ensure the public understood the purpose and benefits of the WCMF. An example of a change to the program was the creation of a Community Participation coordinating committee (“Evaluation” 2002).

Having succeeded in getting the community to accept the project, the task now is to build upon this so as to solidify ties and community support. Clearly, the community has the most to benefit from the project, but it is their involvement that is needed to make it a success. The WCMF has targeted youth as a key factor to facilitate better community relations in the future. Specifically, the aim is for this to be accomplished through field workshops and camps, in cooperation with the Cree School Board. In addition to field involvement, the Model Forest plans to prepare a GIS-based interactive CD-ROM of the results and activities of the WCMF (“Proposal” 2002). Altogether, increasing community involvement is very likely to succeed.

Partnerships

Mentioned throughout this analysis is the absolute importance of partnerships for the WCMF. When funds and human resource capacity are limited, partner contributions, both financially and in-kind, are essential. Consequently, it can safely be said that lack of

effective partnerships is a key problem of the Model Forest. Some of the partnership troubles include: a low level of trust among partners, tensions between forest companies of the Model Forest and the WCMF itself, and the general inefficiency and ineffectiveness of many of the partnerships (“Evaluation” 2002; “Proposal” 2002).

Before examining and describing the recommendations and changes to the WCMF, it is important to touch upon theories and research in cross-cultural partnerships. The first point of significance is that cross-cultural ventures are subject to a multitude of problems. In fact they fail more frequently than homogeneous operations, and in those that do survive, frequently partners are displeased with each other (NAFA 2000; Graen and Hui 1996). However, at the same time, if initial problems can be overcome, they have the potential for success beyond that of other operations.

For partnerships to work effectively they must account for some important circumstances. Two of the most frequently mentioned components of successful cross-cultural ventures are trust and compromise (NAFA 2000). Nevertheless, understanding cultural differences alone is not enough; rather it is recommended that an organization create a unique culture of its own that synthesizes unique aspects of those involved. To accomplish this, “systematic differences must be understood, reconciled and transcended” (Graen and Hui 1996, 3). A process that assists in this regard is the use of consensus. The benefit of working toward consensus is that cultural differences are intrinsically learnt and understood through the process (NAFA 2000; Segil 1998).

Overall, there are actually six essential elements for successful collaboration. The first is creative thinking. Each partnership brings in unique elements and it is important that no model should be followed too closely. Secondly, possible cultural issues must be dealt with carefully and proactively, leaving out cultural aspects that are unimportant to

the venture. The third aspect is that motivation, objectives, and expectations must be clearly defined from the outset to prevent future disagreement and misunderstanding. The fourth element is for the partners to have clearly defined roles and responsibilities, so that everyone involved knows they are contributing. The fifth component is relationship building, as this is necessary to build trust among partners. The final element is that everyone must share the payoffs and hardships (NAFA 2000). To a certain extent, the Waswanipi Cree Model Forest has already made progress on these key elements, but there is much room for improvement.

Effective Governance

Clearly problems with governance have been a most difficult problem for the Model Forest. It is this aspect that has posed the greatest barrier and consequently limited growth and success of the Model Forest the most. However, the proposed changes to governance present some unique and interesting ideas. The changes aim to increase the effectiveness of partners and in doing so ease the financial pressure and capacity issues, while also enabling the partners to get more out the process.⁸

Generally, the idea behind the governance structure changes is the creation of three different levels of contributors. The responsibilities and expectations of contributors will be clearly defined and agreed upon from the beginning. The overall purpose behind this change is to enable interested parties to make a meaningful contribution to the Model Forest. This is vital because in the past, some parties were not able to contribute at the level that was appropriate for them, leaving them disinterested or abandoning the process

⁸ The scope of this case study does not allow for a complete explanation of the proposed governance changes, nor a discussion of the administration changes. Consult pages 25-30 of *Proposal (Five Year Action Plan)* for complete details.

altogether. Additionally, other potentially interested parties did not become involved in the WCMF for the same reason (“Proposal” 2002).

The first and most important level of contribution is “*Proponents of the WCMF*”. *Proponents* will have to commit both time and services to the entire operation of the Model Forest. Additionally they will have to commit to cross-cultural learning, building capacity and assist the WCMF in maintaining effective governance structure. This group will form the Executive, and as such be responsible for overall decision-making. The second level is “*Partners of the WCMF*”. *Partners* will be those organizations that have specific interests in projects and activities of the Forest. They will be involved in decision-making to a certain extent, and will be expected to assist in the development and delivery of projects. Overall they must agree to help the WCMF in reaching its objectives, thus also assisting in cross-cultural learning and capacity building. The final level of contribution is “*Collaborators of the WCMF*”. *Collaborators* are individuals who agree to assist the program. This category has a broad range; from those who make a financial or technical contribution to those who provide any kind of basic assistance. The purpose of this category is to recognize the importance of all those who support the Model Forest (“Proposal” 2002).

The proposed changes to the WCMF governance are certainly bold. It is a major shift from the current governance and as such poses many risks, but for the same reasons it presents the greatest opportunity for the Model Forest to meet with success in the future. Given the fact that the new governance structure tackles all five aspects of a successful partnership, while also touching upon other major problems of the Model Forest, it is a well-founded plan.

CONCLUSION

Without any doubt the Waswanipi Cree Model Forest faced certain and significant obstacles in the first four years of its operation. Its unique situation as an aboriginal model forest in a remote location faced special challenges; no one involved knew quite what to expect. Much was learnt during its first years of operation and impressive key successes were achieved. More importantly, these benefits can now be built upon. While there have been many barriers and problems, the flexibility and willingness of the WCMF to identify and make the necessary changes to overcome and solve problems, will significantly improve the chances that the program will be a success for everyone involved. Furthermore, it is through the successes as well as the failures and difficulties of the Model Forest, that lessons and ideas for improvement in other related ventures can be found, and this might be the greatest benefit of all.

APPENDIX A – Important Contacts

* Rhonda Oblin

General Manager
Waswanipi Cree Model Forest
(819) 753-2900 (ext. 29)
email: rhondaoblin@waswanipi.com

- Rhonda Oblin was very willing to provide information. It is important to note the staff at the WCMF are very busy. It may be best to contact her by telephone, as communication with Waswanipi can be difficult at times.

* Dave Barry

Communications Coordinator
McGregor Model Forest Association
(250) 612 5845
email: dave.barry@mcgregor.bc.ca

- Dave Barry was able to provide some useful links for the WCMF. Much of the information he has is related more to the McGregor Model Forest, but he is able to help with requests regarding other Model Forests.

* Brian Bonnell

Manager of Canada's Model Forest Program
PH: (613) 947-9021
email: BBonnell@NRCan.gc.ca

- Mr. Bonnell recommended other people who could be contacted for more specific information regarding the WCMF, such as Mr. Robert (see below).

* Jacques Robert

Regional Model Forest Coordinator
Canadian Forest Service, Laurentian Forestry Centre
PH: (418) 721-5350
email: robert@cfl.forestry.ca

- Mr. Robert provided the very useful Phase II 2002-2007 Proposal. He was frequently suggested as the main contact for information regarding the WCMF.

* Dr. John E. Hall R.P.F.

Science Advisor
CFS Science Programs
Natural Resources Canada
PH: (613) 947-0646 FAX: (613) 947-9035
email: jhall@NRCan.gc.ca

- Dr. Hall had formerly been the manager of the Model Forest Program. He was the contact name given in the Solutions article (see Reference list), but no longer works on the Model Forest program. Dr. Hall mentioned he could be contacted for other information.

*** Jean Boucher**

Indian and Northern Affairs Canada

320, St. Joseph East

Room 400

Québec (Québec)

G1K 9J2

PH: (418) 951-7590 FAX: (418) 648-7685

email: boucherjj@inac.gc.ca

- I had originally emailed Indian and Northern Affairs (Quebec Region) for general information regarding Waswanipi. Mr. Boucher responded to me directly. Among the information he provided was this contact, which could be useful in related research:

On Nabakatuk Forestry Products and their joint venture with Donohue [Dotmar] you could contact M. Norman Gull, President of the administrative council at 514-866-1234- ext.: 25.

APPENDIX B – Questions Raised and Future Research Ideas

- The Harmonization table mentioned in the introduction was supposed to help foster involvement and cooperation. Strangely, it was not mentioned again in any of the main sources I was able to locate. The idea sounded interesting and it would be useful to research it further. Some things to consider: Did it work as planned or not? What factors contributed to its success or failure? How could the concept be modified to work better in other circumstances?
- Some time between January 21, 2003, when the information from the Canadian Model Forest website (http://www.modelforest.net/e/home_/cana_/waswanie.html) was printed and the middle of March, the size of the WCMF changed from 209,600 hectares to 3.3 million hectares. A search for further information regarding this change proved ineffective. However, how and why the WCMF was expanded would be very interesting to investigate, as this is clearly a significant expansion. The likely prospect was that it was expanded to include all 52 of the traplines mentioned in the case study.
- Cross-cultural partnerships with First Nations would be a very interesting area to pursue further. From preliminary research, it is a topic for which little had been published, but clearly something that is of ever growing importance in Canada.
- Similarly, a business perspective analysis of the proposed changes to the governance structure (and proposed administrative changes) of the WCMF would be most useful. Further analysis and research in regards to the potential prospects and difficulties is important. See “Proposal (Five Year Action Plan)” pages 25-30 for more detailed breakdown of the anticipated changes.

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