

RESEARCH - ANALYSIS - SOLUTIONS

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Manitoba's Bi Pole III Debate: Where the rubber hits the road

It is not coincidental that whether to run Bi Pole III down the east side of Lake Manitoba or the west side of the province is becoming a controversy just before the provincial election, but it is also true that as we collectively begin to acknowledge our negative impact on the environment, polemics of this nature will become more common, elections or not.

It is difficult for the public to fully grasp the implications of the Bi Pole III debate because firstly, it's a complicated issue and secondly, details are being spun and contorted to fit political aspirations. In order to allow some light to enter the debate, we would like to present the controversy within the context of a sustainable development framework.

What is sustainable development?

Use of the word "sustainable" originated with The Brundtland Report, which defined sustainable development (SD) as: ". . . *development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*". SD is most commonly understood to contain three broad themes: social, economic and environmental sustainability, and to study the connection between the three. SD differs from mainstream

economics in several important ways. Mikessell notes the following contrasts between mainstream economics and SD:

- SD considers "natural" capital (the environment) as the primary limiting factor to economic development, as opposed conventional development, which considers human-made capital (factories, tools, technology) to be the most important constraint;
- SD assumes inter-generational constraints regarding resource availability; in other words, we're not leaving enough resources for future generations, something that mainstream economics either ignores or blithely assumes that technology will solve;
- SD measures performance of development by including all social benefits and costs, and it adds resource and social destruction into its calculus. So, where mainstream economics considers only the increases in GDP when measuring the success of, for example, past hydro development, SD deducts the cost of environmental damage and the stress, illness and loss of livelihood suffered by First Nations people affected by hydro development.

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- SD considers waste and pollution absorption as essential functions; the fact that we produce more waste than our environment can absorb limits economic growth.
- SD recognizes the importance of the precautionary principle: where knowledge of impacts is limited, we should proceed with caution, especially where risks are significant or irreversible. There is much we do not know about the east-side boreal forest.

Understanding these differences between mainstream economic development and sustainable development gives us a new lens with which to view the Bi Pole III debate.

The Triple Bottom Line: Connecting Environment, Economy and Social Issues.

The west side, in simple economic terms, will be costlier than an east-side route, but we strongly disagree with the amount of that difference because west-side critics keep including the increased cost of the two converter stations that are required regardless of which route is chosen. We also disagree on the seriousness of the possibility of export market loss in the US should the eastern route be chosen, and how that loss would impact Manitoba Hydro. But there's more at stake: a SD analysis allows us to see the "triple bottom line" of hydro development.

How Much is a Forest Worth?

According to the Canadian Boreal Initiative; "taken together, the carbon and intactness values of Manitoba's Boreal are some of the richest in the world, especially in northern Manitoba and along the east side of Lake Winnipeg" (our italics). The map (end of article) shows how important Manitoba's forest is (orange = high intactness and carbon values, followed by yellow and green).

The west side of Lakes Manitoba and Winnipegosis, where the west-side route is proposed, contains pockets of high-value boreal, but it is fragmented with lower value boreal, farmland, roads, forestry, mining and hydro-electric activity and settlements. The difference between the two areas is the *intactness* of the east side. In fact, a global map of the boreal forest (<http://www.borealcanada.ca/images/map-intactforests.png>) shows the east side of Lake Winnipeg and the western part of Ontario to have the highest quality boreal forest *in the world*.

Although not 100% pristine, the east side is intact, referring to its ". . . continuity of systems and processes, un-fragmented and distant from human infrastructure". It is both the considerable size of the area and its intactness that make it unique in the world, not just in Canada.

According to The International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), the area in question¹ contains several interconnected natural environments that provide important "ecosystem services"². In order for these services to continue to be provided, natural environments within the region have to remain whole and connected. One of the most important services is that of wildlife habitat, particularly in this case, for the boreal woodland caribou.

According to the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS), the woodland caribou — listed nationally and provincially as Threatened — needs *intact* forest to survive. CMC Consultants confirm that ". . . the west side presents the best options for woodland caribou in Manitoba". The greatest danger to caribou is that the hydro line would increase human access to the territory's herds, a disturbance that the species does not tolerate well. Other threats include increased predation as wolves may use hydro lines to hunt caribou, and cross-species contamination as hydro lines can open up habitat to whitetail deer who can transmit deadly pathogens to the caribou.

The IISD estimates, conservatively, that the "overall ecosystem service value provided by the Pimachio-win Aki area is between C\$121 and C\$130 million per year. This valuation demonstrates a new way of thinking about the environment (we used to assign no value to it) and helps us understand the position of US lobby groups like Fresh Energy:

Fresh Energy claims that Manitoba Hydro is able to sell power to Excel Energy at a low rate *because the external environmental and socio-economic costs are not included* (emphasis added) (CMC Consultants Inc. 2007, 24).

For better or worse, US environmental lobby groups have the potential to bring this new attitude to bear on hydro development in Manitoba:

¹ The area outlined includes Atikaki (Manitoba) and Woodland Caribou (Ontario) Provincial Parks and the traditional lands of several Anishinabe First Nations communities.

² Eco-system services include carbon absorption; flood protection, pollination, etc.

Fresh Energy and [Minnesotans for Energy Efficient Economy] ME3 appear to have a strong presence in Minnesota, and will continue to attempt to negatively influence purchases of Manitoba hydro-electric power. A lengthy dispute with First Nations over the selection of a route for the Bipole III line will likely add 'fuel to the fire' regarding opposition to the purchase of power from Manitoba. (CMC Consultants Inc. 2007, 24).

These groups have influenced legislation in Minnesota, requiring that Manitoba Hydro report annually on those First Nations included in the Northern Flood Agreement³. The legislation was repealed, but only after intense lobbying from the Manitoba government. Wisconsin also came close to making legislative amendments that would have allowed that state to count Manitoba Hydro imports as renewable only if the concerns of First Nations were seen to have been dealt with. Concerns would include those related to new and past Manitoba Hydro development.

Many west-side critics are quick to praise globalization and free-market principles that transcend borders as long as it causes GDP to grow, but when environmental protection is raised, they resent the meddling of foreigners. But these foreigners are compelled by a sea change in attitude that has to transcend borders because environmental problems are universal.

Outstanding Universal Value/Pimachiowin Aki

Pimachiowin Aki means "the land that gives life" in Ojibwe. It is the name of a non-profit corporation that submitted an application to have the area with the same name recognized as a World Heritage Site⁴ (see map over). To obtain the designation, its "outstanding universal value" must be shown. The World Conservation Union defines outstanding universal value as:

... cultural and/or natural significance which is so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries and to be of common importance for present and future generations of all humanity. As such, the permanent protection of this heritage is of the highest importance to the international community as a whole.

3 Parties to the Northern Flood Agreement are the governments of Canada and Manitoba, Manitoba Hydro and the Northern Flood Committee Inc. - made up of the five First Nations communities that were adversely affected by the flooding caused by the Nelson and Churchill River diversion in the 1970s.

4 Pimachiowin Aki is made up of: Little Grand Rapids; Pikangikum First Nation, in Ontario; Poplar River First Nation; Pauingassi First Nation; Bloodvein First Nations; and the governments of Ontario and Manitoba.

The natural significance in the area has been noted by several national and international environmental groups, including the powerful American lobby group, Natural Resource Defense Council (NRDC)⁵. Cultural, recreational and spiritual values, although difficult to ascertain, must also be considered. The IISD report acknowledges that spiritual and cultural heritage is of infinite value to the Ainishinabe. Obtaining the World Heritage Site designation will help Pimachiowin Aki proceed with their plans for economic development and job creation in eco-tourism. Such development fits within the criteria of permissible management plans concerning cultural and natural heritage.

Critics of the west-side route claim that running Bi Pole III down the east side will not damage the UNESCO application. The report by CMC Consultants, although non-committal overall, is less sanguine on this point: "A transmission line within the site would certainly weaken the case for inscription based on 'natural values'". Decisions in other parts of Canada would confirm the report's concerns: Newfoundland and Labrador Conservative Premier Danny Williams cancelled plans to build a new transmission line through Gros Morne National Park, due to concerns about environmental damage and the risk of losing the park's designation as a UNESCO World Heritage site. The transmission line was re-routed along a longer corridor outside of the park.

Duty to Consult

A final consideration that demonstrates a long-overdue change in societal values is the recognition of First Nations' rights. The government has a duty to consult around Aboriginal and treaty rights and must be adequately accommodate them if development violates or negatively impacts their rights. Placing Bi Pole III down the east side could result in years of negotiations with the First Nations communities who remember the bitter legacy of past hydro development:

Manitoban tax payers have paid out over \$700 million in compensation to First Nations adversely affected by hydro development. This price tag helps us understand the extent of suffering and upheaval endured by many, but it can never adequately com-

5 According to CMC Consultants, the New York Times and Wall Street Journal consider NRDC to be one of America's most powerful environmental groups. It is a known supporter of the UNESCO World Heritage Site application and collaborates with Poplar River First Nations. The east side boreal is part of NRDC's BioGems campaign, found on the NRDC website.

pensate them for their losses, nor can it repair the massive environmental damage wreaked by past hydro development.

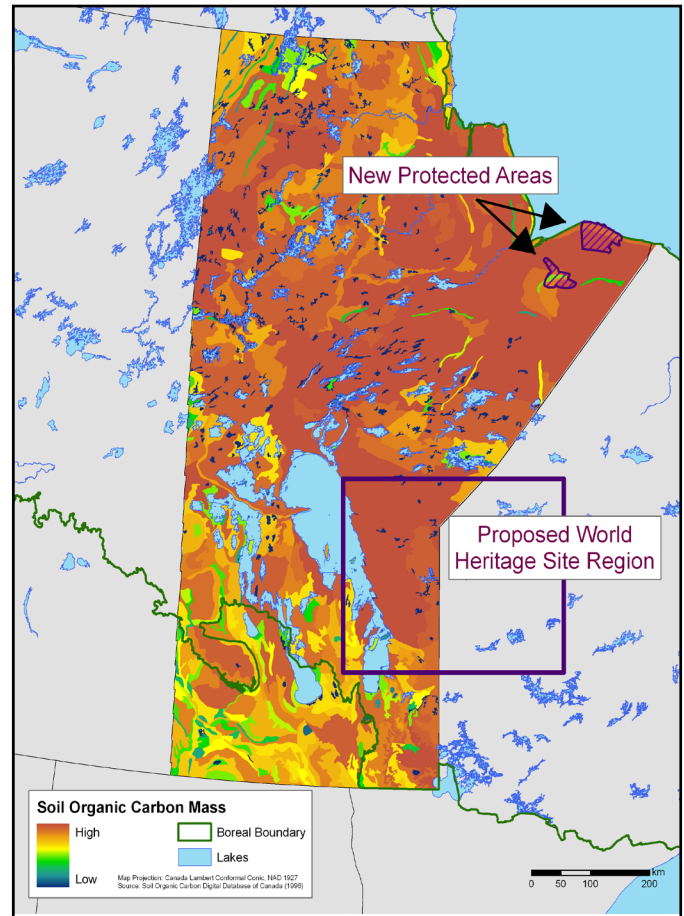
The Rubber Hits the Road

Bi Pole III is an example of the “rubber hitting the road” in terms of our relationship with Aboriginal rights and environmental protection. Canadians agree in principle that we need new attitudes and practices, but are we willing to adopt a new paradigm that allows these changes to occur? Those unwilling to turn the page will continue to present the Bi Pole III story in main-stream economic and technical terms without considering the broader implications afforded by a SD approach. Those who apply a SD lens broaden their scope and sharpen their vision on issues that were not even considered twenty years ago. This approach makes the analysis more complex, but it produces a more comprehensive understanding of difficult issues like Bi Pole III.

The provincial government must take the lead as we begin to wrestle with climate change, species protection and loss of biodiversity. In fact, the Province is simply complying with the *Sustainable Development Act* which, ironically, was written and tabled by the last Conservative government. In contrast, in its Bi Pole III analysis, the current Conservative party does not apply full-cost accounting, as prescribed by the Act, and has vowed to reverse the decision to run Bi Pole III on the west side.

As more Manitobans understand the value of “services” provided by increasingly rare regions like the Pimachiowin Aki, they will also appreciate the spirit and logic of *The Sustainable Development Act* and SD in general.

If the Province leads, Manitobans will follow.



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