

Where The Creator Sits

The Quest to Protect The East Side of Lake Winnipeg

**I dedicate this story to the people living
on the East side of Lake Winnipeg whose
voices have often been forgotten, but
who stood strong.
Your ancestors would be proud.**

Photographs and story by
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This is my story, my own recollection of events that took place during my involvement in the efforts to protect the East side of Lake Winnipeg.

I apologize up front if I left out key people and events. This is not meant to be an exhaustive account, but rather reflections on my own personal journey. Other people involved in this campaign, and believe me there were plenty of folks involved, can tell their own version of events about this campaign to protect the East side of Lake Winnipeg.

Dates and places are based on my memory, newspaper clippings and my extensive files. What follows is not intended to be an authoritative academic account—that would require a book to achieve.

I felt the need to write my story when Manitoba Premier Brian Pallister released the economic review of Bipole III and Keeyask, prepared by former Saskatchewan Premier Brad Wall in November 2020.

This report reached an inaccurate conclusion. It claimed there was no compelling evidence of sufficient opposition to force the government of Manitoba to make a decision, in 2005, to scrap Manitoba Hydro's plans to construct Bipole III down the East of Lake Winnipeg. Wall is wrong: there was plenty of opposition.

My relationship to land on the East side of Lake Winnipeg started back in my University days in the early 1980s.

I used to do solo weekend canoe trips into Nopiming Provincial Park. Then in 1983 the Province of Ontario created the Woodland Caribou Park, sister park to Manitoba's Atikaki Wilderness Park, which was created two years later in 1985. I ended up convincing a couple of co-workers at the United Army Surplus Store on Portage Ave. to accompany me on a 14-day canoe trip in the newly created park and into Manitoba.

My story to protect the East side of Lake Winnipeg did not fully start until around 1998, but really it started well before this.

I was approached sometime in 1996 by Colleen McCrory, the 1992 recipient of the Goldman Environmental Prize, and asked if I would consider taking on the role of being the North American Coordinator for the Taiga Rescue Network, an international pan-boreal organization that was founded in 1992 in Finland and disbanded in 2010.

However, I said that for the purposes of North America, we needed to call the North American node of the Taiga Rescue Network something else, because no one in North America, other than scientists, had ever heard of the boreal forest being referred to as the Taiga.

thus the Boreal Forest Network (BFN) was born.

BFN ended up sharing office space with the Manitoba Eco-Network on Albert Street in Winnipeg's Old Market Square.

In 1997 the highly influential World Resource Institute released its Last Forest Frontier report, which said that Russia, Canada and Brazil, in that order, had the world's largest remaining primary intact frontier forests.

The pan-boreal forests are literally the Northern Lungs of the World.

I met Garry Raven, an Anishinaabe traditional elder from Hollow Water First Nation, sometime in 1994. He asked me to come to Sagkeeng First Nation to attend a sweat lodge ceremony run by Fabian Morrisseau.

This ceremony turned out to be a pivotal point in my journey to help protect the East side of Lake Winnipeg. It was also a key part of my own journey as a person, and my connection to the land.

It was at this sweat lodge ceremony that I was introduced to other elders in the area, including Mark Thompson and John Kent. From that point onward I had no choice but to help.

All of these East side Elders have since gone to the spirit world, sadly.

In the spring of 1998, I helped Gary Raven organize the first of many gatherings of the Anishinaabe Turtle Island Protectors (ATIP), at Raven's Creek in Hollow Water First Nations.

The Raven's Creek gathering of grassroots traditional Indigenous Peoples from the area, along with non-Indigenous people, was held to discuss Tembec's proposed forestry plans. Tembec had just purchased the Pine Falls Paper Company paper mill, with the intention of expanding their forestry operations up the East side of Lake Winnipeg. Their plan included a 730 km all-weather road north of Hollow Water First Nation, so they could access the primary intact boreal forest in the Integrated Wood Supply Area East.

In June of 1998, I assisted Gary Raven and ATIP in organizing a march to bring attention to Tembec's expansion plans for the entire East side of Lake Winnipeg. Roughly 150 people, mostly Indigenous, marched from Clark's Corner at the junction of Hwy. 304 and Hwy. 11, to the office of the paper mill plant located some 3km away in Pine Falls, Manitoba. When the marchers showed up at the front doors of the offices of the paper mill, Gary laid out his sacred bundle on the front lawn of the office and did a pipe ceremony, after which we had a brief meeting with Tembec officials.



Garry Raven picking blueberries at Black Island

Following the march to Tembec's paper mill, Gary Raven as the lead for ATIP and I as the coordinator for BFN spent the next several months meeting with government officials, with Cabinet Ministers from the Gary Filmon government, and with elected First Nations leaders from various East side of Lake Winnipeg communities.

We met also with members of the Manitoba NDP, the Official Opposition at the time, while all along the way we were building allies in order to strengthen opposition to Tembec's forest expansion plans.

For Gary's efforts, ATIP was awarded, in December of 1998, the Manitoba Eco-Network Award for its "significant contributions to the protection and awareness of Manitoba's environment."

By the summer of 1999 Manitoba was in fully in election mode. The provincial election would be held in September, and the Filmon government had been publicly exposed for their involvement in a vote rigging scandal in the previous election, that had been designed to bleed votes from the NDP.

It was rumoured that the Minister of Transportation, Darren Praznick, had made a commitment to Tembec that if re-elected, the Filmon government would foot the bill for Tembec's all-weather road up the East side of Lake Winnipeg.

Apparently, the Transport Minister failed to mention this commitment to Premier Filmon, which, I have been told, led to a shouting match between the Premier and Minister Praznick that could be heard throughout the hallways of the Legislative Building.

I had learned that Bob Rae, former NDP Premier of Ontario and now the Canadian Ambassador to the United Nations, was on the Board of Directors of Tembec and I just happened to know someone who had his personal cellphone number. So, in the summer of 1999 I gave him a call and briefly appraised him of the Tembec situation, and asked if we could meet in Winnipeg. To my surprise he agreed

The meeting happened later that summer at a Winnipeg restaurant where myself, Gary Raven, Frank Dottori, CEO of Tembec, Bob Rae, Phil Fontaine, AFN Grand Chief at the time, and Jack Woodward, a well-known lawyer specializing in Aboriginal law all met. The outcome of that meeting was that Tembec would agree to withdraw temporarily its application, for approval under the Manitoba Environment Act, to proceed with its expansion plans until sometime after the provincial election.

Well the rest as they say was history. Filmon lost the election and Tembec never did get the opportunity to submit its application to proceed with expansion plans for the East side of Lake Winnipeg.

This was the first big obstacle that both the Boreal Forest Network and the Anishinaabe Turtle Island Protectors managed to overcome in the quest to protect the East side of Lake Winnipeg. By no means would it be the last, as the looming Manitoba Hydro HVDC Bipole III transmission line issue was about to rise up above the horizon in 2000.

Within a year of being elected the provincial NDP government, under Gary Doer's leadership, began the process of establishing the East Side Planning Initiative (ESPI).



The ESPI brought together various stakeholders with an interest in the East Side of Lake Winnipeg, as well as all of the First Nation communities on the East Side of Lake Winnipeg.

This newly initiated process was the first time any government in Manitoba had made a concerted effort to undertake large area land use planning were all of the First Nations communities in the region were involved right from the get go.

Eric Robinson, an Indigenous MLA who represented the provincial riding that encompassed the entire East side of Lake Winnipeg, was appointed by Premier Doer as the Minister of Aboriginal and Northern Affairs, and I am certain he played a very big part in making ESPI happen.

By this time there was a growing interest by a number of very large, mostly US-based foundations in funding efforts to protect more of Canada's boreal forest.

In late 1999, I appeared before the Senate Subcommittee on the Boreal Forest, co-chaired by Manitoba Senator Mira Spivak. I eventually ended up doing a short contract for the Senator regarding this Senate Subcommittee's work.

This connection with Senator Spivak resulted in a meeting with then Federal Minister of the Environment, David Anderson. This meeting in the Minister's Ottawa office was brief, but we did talk about the East side of Lake Winnipeg.

At the end of the meeting, I was pulled aside by the Minister's aide and asked if I might help with organizing a trip for the Minister down the Bloodvein River in Manitoba at some future time. Of course I obliged – just give me call I said.

In the late summer of 2000, and without much notice, I got the call from the Minister's office saying the Minister would be in Winnipeg for a week in September attending a Federal Liberal Caucus Retreat at the Fort Garry Hotel, and could I pull together a short two-day trip down the Bloodvein River. So I did.



I, along with two other folks from Manitoba, accompanied the Minister and one of his staff down the Bloodvein River for two days of fishing, shooting rapids and chatting by the camp fire at night.

Let's just say that this little two-day paddle down the Bloodvein was a very successful part of our efforts to protect the East Side of Lake Winnipeg.

By 2000, Pew Charitable Trust Foundation had begun to lay the ground work for investing some of their considerable resources in the international campaign to protect more of Canada's boreal forest. This led to some major US and Canadian Environmental groups starting the process of developing a broad-based boreal forest campaign strategy.

I soon found myself travelling to Washington D.C. to attend a meeting at the Aspen Institute's Wye River facility, to discuss how a Canadian boreal forest campaign might unfold.

The Boreal Forest Network was very much a grassroots organization, working mostly with and supporting Indigenous Peoples' struggles against large-scale resource development projects in their traditional territories.

I was now starting to be concerned about this very large US Foundation and the large U.S.-based environmental organizations parachuting themselves and their campaigns in to Canada. Nevertheless, I felt it was necessary to be in these types of rooms not only to advocate on behalf of the grassroots, but also to bell the cat, as they say.

2000 was also the year that the World Resource Institute funded Global Forest Watch Canada, which I was part of, released its Canada's Forests at a Cross Roads report, which clearly demonstrated that the East side of Lake Winnipeg was the last remaining contiguous intact primary forest left in Manitoba.

The years between 2000 and 2009 were an extremely intense time, not only for the campaign to protect the East side of Lake Winnipeg, but also for the national and international campaigns to shine a light on the plight of Canada's Boreal Forest, which stretches from the East coast of Canada to the Western tip of Alaska.

I will attempt to encapsulate, as briefly as possible, the key moments and events that served to further enhance our efforts in Manitoba to protect the East Side of Lake Winnipeg during this time.

There were three, key Manitoba-based environmental organizations focused on Manitoba boreal forest issues during this time: Manitoba Wildlands; Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society – Manitoba Chapter; and the Boreal Forest Network. While we each had different approaches and mandates, we did have an agreement to work collaboratively on our efforts when it came to the East side of Lake Winnipeg.

This working agreement between the three environmental groups in Manitoba was necessary, because we were all concerned that the pending international campaign to protect Canada's boreal forest was going to roll over our locally-based collective efforts and our working relationships developed over the years with Indigenous Peoples on the East side of Lake Winnipeg.

In 2000, the three groups came into possession of a leaked Manitoba Hydro memo, which clearly indicated that Manitoba Hydro was very interested in proceeding with plans to construct Bipole III down the East side of Lake Winnipeg.

2000 was also the year that the Pew Charitable Trust Foundation launched its international campaign to protect more of Canada's boreal forest, and created the Canadian Boreal Trust Foundation. Sometime in 2003 they renamed it the Canadian Boreal Initiative.

2000 was also Taiga Rescue Networks seven day international biennial meeting, held in Moscow in early September. As the North American coordinator for the Taiga Rescue Network my attendance was pretty well mandatory, so off I went and I brought Garry Raven with me.

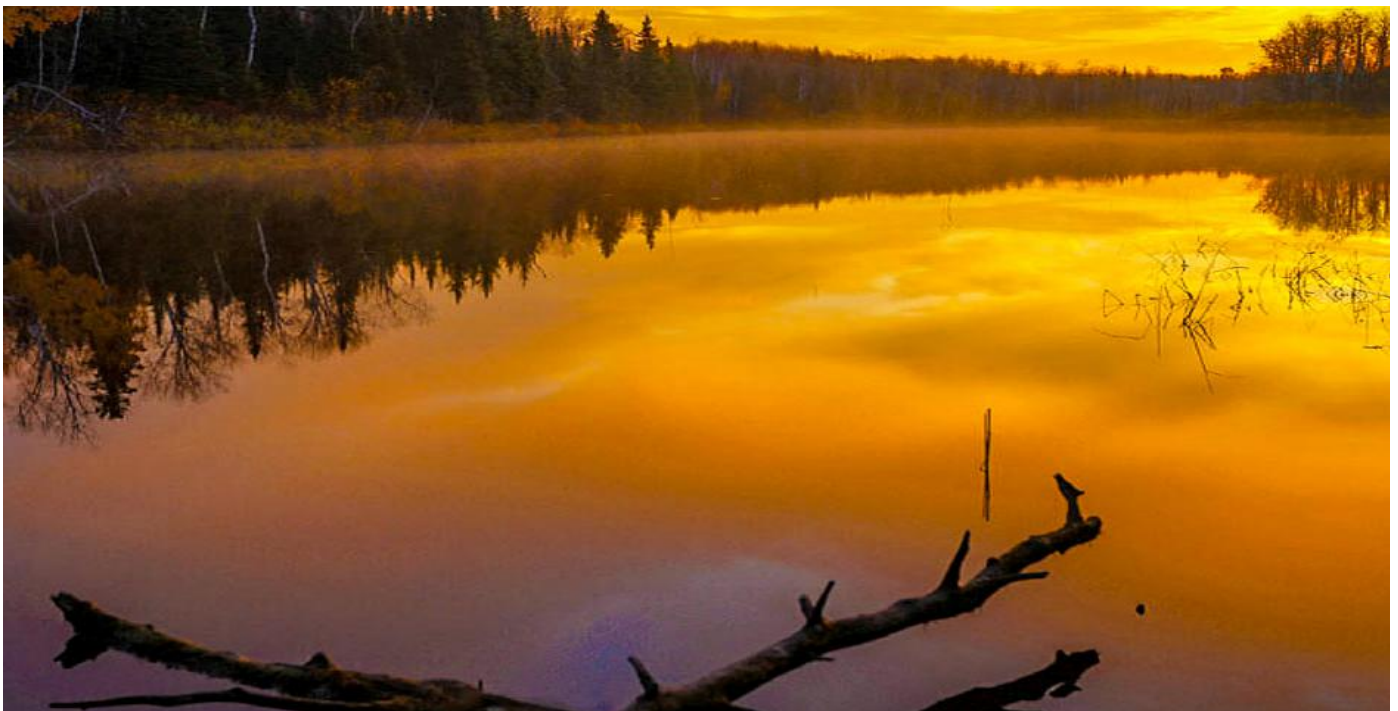
This international meeting proved to be very fruitful in our efforts to promote the protection of the East side of Lake Winnipeg, and Garry Raven was a very big hit with the network membership.

In addition, it was determined that the next international meeting of the Taiga Rescue Network was going to be hosted by the Boreal Forest Network in Winnipeg in 2002.

Some time in the early summer of 2001, I received a call from the editor of the National Geographic Magazine, asking if I might provide them with logistical support for a story they were working on about the boreal forest. Of course I jumped on that opportunity.

I ended up going to number of places in Manitoba with Peter Essick, the assigned National Geographic Magazine photographer, and we spent a few days on the East side of Lake Winnipeg with Garry Raven.

It took until June of 2002 for the article to be published, but there was a photograph of Garry Raven picking traditional medicines and a rather spectacular aerial photo of Tembec's woodlot yard, which the wood lot manager at the time disputed was a photo of their woodlot yard.





This disputed photograph had to be resolved before the edition went to print. That is when I got the second call from the editor of National Geographic Magazine, asking me if I would phone the Tembec woodlot yard manager to inform him that I had indeed been on the plane when the photograph was taken.

Also during this time period, the Boreal Forest Network and the Anishinaabe Turtle Island Protectors hosted Land of Spirit/Spirits of the Land, a traditional gathering of grassroots Indigenous Peoples living in the area. It was held at Raven's Creek in Hollow Water First Nation, and at the end of this four-day gathering, an Elders Declaration was produced regarding the East side of Lake Winnipeg.

We also assisted with getting Indigenous trappers in the area together, and helped create the Wabanong Anishinaabe Trappers Association, which submitted a document to the government of Manitoba's ongoing East Side Planning Initiative outlining their concern about resource extraction development activities in the area.

In the midst of the government's ongoing East Side Planning Initiative, four First Nations communities, three from the East side of Lake Winnipeg and one First Nation from N.W. Ontario, signed an accord in 2002 to work together to protect their traditional territories.

Much of the efforts to get the four First Nations on the East side to work on a common front to protect their traditional territories goes to Sophia Rabliauakas and her partner Ray, from Poplar River First Nation. In 2007 Sophia was recognized for all her efforts with Goldman Environmental Prize.

Out of the blue I got a call from Tom Knudson in 2002. Tom was a two-time Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, who was working on a three-part story for the Sacramento Bee and wanted to come up to Manitoba and spend some time here with me. So we went on a tour of the East side of Lake Winnipeg and then visited Grassy Narrows. Knudson's article, "State of Denial," was published in the spring of 2003.

This was also the year I was awarded the Queen's Golden Jubilee Medal, apparently for my "outstanding and exemplary contributions to my community or to Canada as a whole."

In September of 2002, the Taiga Rescue Network biennial international conference held its three day public portion of the conference at the University of Winnipeg. Its four-day, members-only meeting was held at the Wilderness Edge Retreat in Pinawa.

In attendance at this members-only portion of the international conference were a number of grassroots Indigenous Peoples from the East side of Lake Winnipeg. It became evident to the mostly white environmental groups from outside Manitoba that if the environmental movement working on forestry issues wanted to achieve any success in protecting more of Canada's boreal forest, they were going to need the direct involvement of First Nations. Some at this meeting got that, others did not.

It was also at the closed day portion of our international conference that my love/hate relationship with Pew Charitable Trusts and their International Canadian Boreal Campaign solidified. The cabal they hired to run things in Canada, along with a few of their US environmental organization supporters, tried and failed miserably to have me removed as the North American Coordinator for the Taiga Rescue Network.

Immediately after winning their second term in June of 2003, the Manitoba NDP government was confronted with the task of dealing with Manitoba Hydro, who had by now been conducting meetings with communities on the East side of Lake Winnipeg to discuss their plans for running the Bipole III transmission line down the East side of Lake Winnipeg. These discussions occurred independent of the government-run East Side Planning Initiative.

Once this was discovered, Manitoba Hydro agreed to suspend all future community meetings about their Bipole III plans until the East Side Planning Initiative had concluded.

Also during this time, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), one of the two organizations sanctioned by the United Nations to do the heavy lifting for the UNESCO World Heritage Committee during the World Heritage site nomination process, met in Russia in October 2003 to discuss the need to include more sites in the boreal forest for consideration as potential locations for new UNESCO World Heritage Site designation.

A report of this meeting was published in June, 2004, and at the top of their list in Canada for a potential UNESCO World Heritage Site designation was the East Side of Lake Winnipeg.

Shortly after this report was published, the Canadian government placed the East Side of Lake Winnipeg site on its short list for consideration as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

The Federal Minister at the time, who would have had to sign off on this, was none other than our 2000 Bloodvein River paddling partner, the Hon. David Anderson.

This was also the time when the Pew Charitable Trust-funded International Boreal Conservation Campaign took full form, with the establishment of the Canadian Boreal Initiative, the creation of the Boreal Leadership Council and the launch of the Boreal Conservation Framework Agreement.

The Boreal Forest Network wanted to keep its distance from this process, other than to take their money and keep a close watch, because this initiative was clearly based on the elite accommodation model and a very top-down approach to boreal conservation. Their approach more or less left out the grassroots and it most certainly did not include the input of the grassroots Indigenous Peoples in Canada who were involved in the struggle to protect their traditional territories from large-scale resource extraction activities.

Also in June of 2004, along with others, I accompanied Robert Kennedy Jr., then the senior attorney for the US based Natural Resources Defense Council, up to Pimicikamak Cree Nation to get a first hand account of the impacts of Manitoba Hydro development in the 1970s. We then went on to visit Poplar River First Nation, where we took a boat ride up river to Weaver Lake and stayed the night at the healing camp set up by Poplar River First Nation.

On June 15th of that year, an op-ed appeared in the Winnipeg Free Press, written by Robert Kennedy Jr., in which he outlined his experiences with both of these First Nation communities during the trip. Helen Falding, a reporter for the Winnipeg Free Press, wrote a separate news story on her interview with Robert Kennedy Jr.

We were having success in bringing a lot of attention to the boreal forest on the East side of Lake Winnipeg.

In July, 2004, ForestEthics, a large US-based environmental group that specialized in consumer market campaigns against forest companies, released its Bringing Down The Boreal report. I was one of a number of researchers and reviewers of this report.

The stage was now set for a Canadian forest markets campaign and Tembec's forest expansion plans for the East side of Lake Winnipeg were now a target, with the potential for a pending US/Canada markets campaign against them should they try again to expand their forestry operations on the East side of Lake Winnipeg.

In early September, 2004, the Boreal Forest Network organized a seven day canoe trip down the Bloodvein. One of the ten people on the trip was Alex Shoumatoff, a well known writer with ten books to his credit, who was a former staff writer for the New Yorker and a contributing editor for both OutSide magazine and Vanity Fair.



Robert Kennedy Jr., Alex Shoumatoff, Don Sullivan and Susan Casey-Lefkowitz

i first met Alex on my June trip with Robert Kennedy Jr., and Alex eventually published a cover story for OnEarth Magazine titled 'Who Owns This River' in June of 2005. This was an explosive article on Manitoba Hydro, and a description of the quest to create a UNESCO World Heritage Site for the East side of Lake Winnipeg.

2005 turned out to be the pivotal point in the efforts to protect a very large chunk of the East side of Lake Winnipeg.

First, there was an alignment of the Manitoba environmental groups and our US counterparts, on a full-blown cross-border campaign, should the forestry industry and Manitoba Hydro attempt to expand their activities on the East side of Lake Winnipeg.

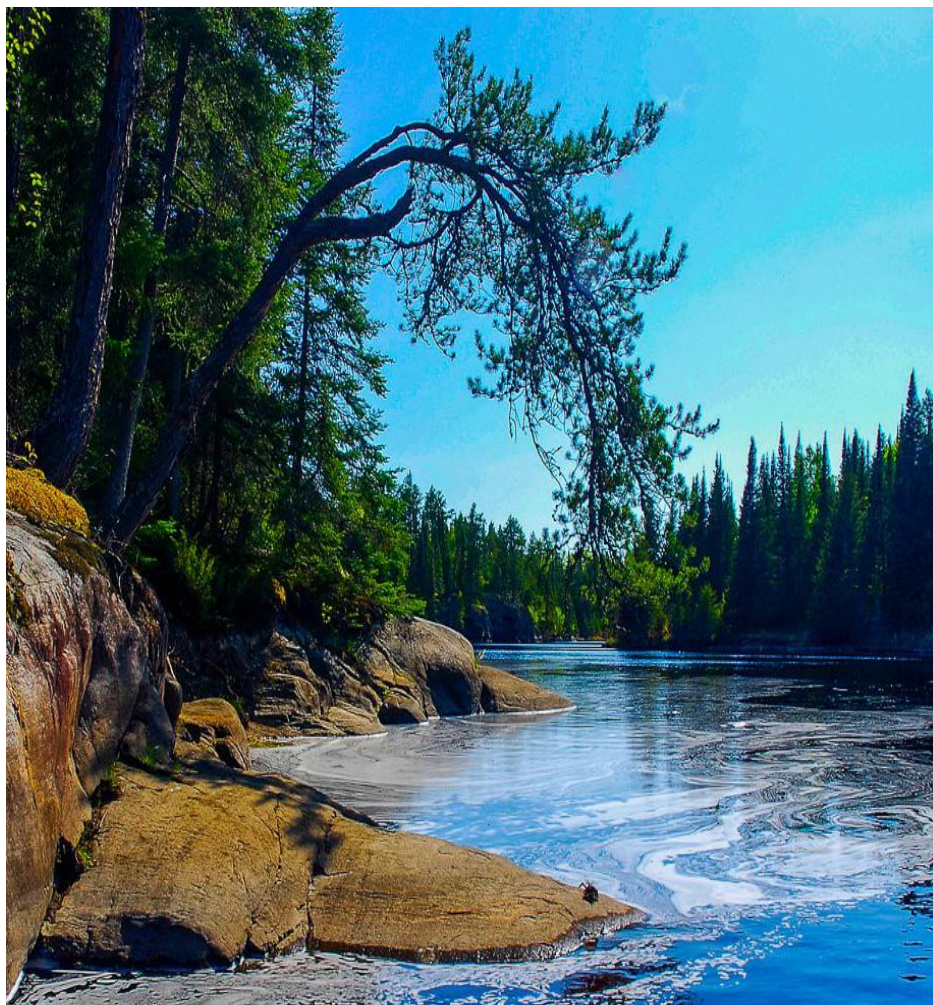
Second, four First Nations on the East side of Lake Winnipeg were now clearly advocating for a UNESCO World Heritage site for their traditional territories. This got tacit approval from the Federal government, which placed the area on Canada's short list for possible UNESCO World Heritage Site designation in 2004.

Finally, by now the government of Manitoba would have had plenty of time to digest the contents of the ESPI, "Promises to Keep..." Towards a Broad Area Plan for the East Side of Lake Winnipeg.

The report, which they received in September 2004, clearly noted that there was no consensus for either forestry expansion, or for Bipole III, on the East side of Lake Winnipeg.

Sensing that there was going to be a very nasty, costly, protracted and potentially embarrassing cross-border campaign against both Manitoba Hydro and the government of Manitoba, Premier Doer made the politically smart decision, in the spring of 2005, to scrap Manitoba Hydro's plans to construct Bipole III down the East Side of Lake Winnipeg.

This decision was eventually affirmed by an independent consultant hired by the government of Manitoba to do a SWOT analysis on the issue of Bipole III.



It was at this point in the campaign that the Boreal Forest Network moved away from being critical of the government of Manitoba, to being supportive, because we knew immediately that the government was going to get some big blowback for their decision to scrap the plans for Bipole III to go down the East side of Lake Winnipeg.

As it turned out, the blowback was almost immediate. Gerald Flood, editor of the Free Press Opinion page, wrote a number of op-ed articles, as did some former Manitoba Hydro engineers.

Eventually, opposition to Doer's decision to move Bipole III from the East side of Lake Winnipeg to the West side of the province led to the formation of the Bipole III Coalition in 2010.

The Bipole III Coalition leadership was comprised mostly of former Manitoba Hydro engineers who were adamantly opposed to Bipole III going down the West side of Manitoba. It was eventually disbanded in 2018, when Bipole III had been completed on the West side of the province.

As part of its organizational fundraising efforts, the Boreal Forest Network had a large canvass operation, run by former Greenpeace canvass manager, Suzanne McCrea. A dozen full-time canvassers worked from spring to fall, going door-to-door throughout Winnipeg not only to raise funds, but more importantly to raise public awareness by handing out our campaign newspaper-style flyers and by talking about the East side issues at the door.



Pimachiowin Aki UNESCO World Heritage Site

From the summer of 2005 onward, our canvass operation focused not only on supporting the Doer government's decision to re-route Bipole III, but also on promoting the proposed UNESCO World Heritage site for the East side of Lake Winnipeg.

Meanwhile, I was embarking on a three-year journey starting in late 2006 to create a limited edition East side of Lake Winnipeg photographic coffee table book, which was eventually released in 2009, titled *Landscapes from Manidooabi – A Photographic Journey on the East Side of Lake Winnipeg*.

As the newly-minted leader of the province's Official Opposition, Hugh McFadyen smelled electoral blood in 2006. The next provincial election was only a year away, and certainly Bipole III would be one of the issues on which to fight the election.

In 2006 the Canadian political landscape changed significantly when Stephen Harper won the federal election. Harper would govern until October of 2015. Being any sort of environmentalist during the Harper reign was not easy - these were dark days for the likes of me.

In early February of 2007 the Manitoba government, joined by the Ontario government, formally announced the establishment of the Pimachiowin Aki non-profit corporation, in order to move ahead with the complex process of creating a UNESCO World Heritage site, which included the traditional territories of four First Nation communities and two provincial parks, one in Manitoba and one in Ontario.

In May of 2007 the Doer Government won a historic third term, and by this time they were fully invested in the UNESCO World Heritage site. Bipole III was no longer an East side of Lake Winnipeg issue, and the all weather road for the East side was being constructed for the East side communities' needs, rather than for the needs of the resource extraction industry.

Further, the winter roads up the East side that serviced the needs of remote communities were no longer open as long as they used to be because of climate change.

During this time I had become a single parent, co-sharing and co-parenting my eight year old daughter, and my focus was making sure that her needs were being met first.

It was also a time when it became increasingly difficult for the Boreal Forest Network to find funders to fund grassroots campaigns. The Pew Charitable Trust-created Canadian Boreal Initiative was not only sucking the wind out of grassroots boreal forest campaigns, but was also consuming all the funding dollars available for these types of campaigns.

The Boreal Forest Network canvass operation in Manitoba raised enough funds to sustain the canvass operation and keep the office going, but not much more.

I was also well into the process of getting my limited edition photographic coffee table book completed and ready for publishing which I had hoped would pay my wages for the work I was doing.

The Boreal Forest Network was working on a number of elements related to a new boreal educational project that we wanted to launch in 2008. However, this project went horribly side ways due to no fault of my own. However, being the head of the organization, the buck stopped with me and the failure of this project weighed heavily on me.

It was at this time that I was approached to work for the Government of Manitoba, as a Special Advisor with a specific focus on the East side of Lake Winnipeg issue and the UNESCO World Heritage site specifically. This was really a dream job that I could not pass up.

Pimachiowin Aki finally received its UNESCO World Heritage site designation in 2018. The World Heritage site included the traditional territories of Bloodvein River First Nation, Little Grand Rapids First Nation, Paungassi First Nation, Poplar River First Nation and two provincial parks, Atikaki Wilderness Park in Manitoba and Woodland Caribou Park in N.W. Ontario.

For me it has been along journey and one that still continues to this day, but it was the journey itself that was the reward, as I learned a lot and made many lasting friendships along the way. On this journey I came away with the knowledge that slow and steady does win the race. More importantly however, I have come to understand that the land is not some inanimate object, but a life giver and we must respect that and honour it and protect it, so the land can go on giving life to all that live on it.



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