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British environmentalists link with natives to fight oil sands

Kevin Libin, National Post
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Chris Schwarz/Canwest News Service

British bankers Paul Monaghan, left, and Colin Baines, centre, dance at a Cree pow-wow in July in Beaver Lake, Alta.

It began much the same way as the annual three-day Beaver Lake Cree pow-wow typically does. The beating of drums, the rise and fall of singing voices, a parade of dancers, young and old, in shawls and skins; young, spinning girls shaking kaleidoscope-coloured jingle dresses. Then came the bankers, trying to keep up with some kind of two-step, their British complexion, ties and corduroy slacks mingling awkwardly with the ruddy, sun-kissed native faces and the riot of colourful feathers and fabrics.

"There is very little doubt I look like a pillock - but who's watching?" one of the Brits would later laugh at himself.

If they looked or felt out of place, it's because, in many ways, they were. The two bankers had travelled 17 hours this July, bringing along British journalists, including a BBC crew, to use the Cree ceremony as part of the U.K.-based Co-operative Bank's publicity campaign to stop oil sands development. They had never been here before, but had in the months prior read unflattering things about Northern Alberta's oil play. Colin Baines, ethics and campaign advisor at the bank, one of the visitors to the pow wow, says he was disturbed enough by what he heard to make it the Co-op's priority to campaign against the industry.

And so the bank, which habitually uses a portion of members' earnings toward so-called social justice causes (slogan: "Good with Money"), teamed up with the U.K.'s World Wildlife Fund and launched a campaign aimed at stopping Alberta's oil sands. Along the way, Mr. Baines stumbled across the story of the Beaver Lake Cree, a little First Nation suing the government to suspend oil sands development.

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"Having a bit of a chat to Chief Al Lameman and some of the councilors ... it all just fitted perfectly with the Co-operative's values and ethos, so we thought, 'Right, these would make a great campaign partner,'" he says. On the bank's website, alongside damning reports and form letters where British voters can write their MPs demanding laws requiring corporations to report "carbon risk," making oil sands investment less attractive, Mr. Baines has installed a page devoted to telling the plight of the Beaver Lake Cree.

Yet, the band is fighting a rather different battle over the oil sands than the bank's anti-carbon crusade: it claims it hasn't been sufficiently consulted, as the law requires, about industrial permitting in their area, and the disruption to wildlife migration patterns by the drilling and seismic activity infringes on their treaty hunting rights.

"The court case of the Beaver Lake Cree nation is about the habitat destruction caused by the tarsands development," says Jack Woodward, the B.C.-based lawyer representing the Beaver Lake Cree. "The Co-operative Bank, and maybe other people who are concerned about climate change, are concerned about the carbon release from the tarsands development. So for different reasons they support the same action."

Were the oil sands to eliminate carbon dioxide emissions tomorrow, it would not help his clients, Mr. Woodard acknowledges. Nor would a settlement between the Beaver Lake Cree and Canadian governments do anything to satisfy the European bank's complaints over carbon emissions.

Nevertheless, the Co-op Bank has donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to back the Beaver Lake Cree's lawsuit. In return, members of the First Nation star in the bank's anti-oil-sands videos, and at their rallies in London, where Chief Lameman wears his headdress, posing among banners reading "Toxic Fuels: Stop Expansion Now." It is a symbiotic arrangement: The two groups may have different goals, but share a common enemy in industry. That, it appears, will suffice.

An anti-oil-sands partnership between a bank in Manchester, England, and a small Alberta First Nation may seem unlikely, but it's part of an increasing alliance between international environmental crusaders and Canadian aboriginals.

"It's a diffident marriage," says Andrew Nikiforuk, an environmental lobbyist and author of *Tar Sands: Dirty Oil and the Future of a Continent*. "Environmental groups by definition tend to be white folks in big cities and First Nations are generally poor folks living in rural Canada, and so I think it would be fair to say that their agendas have rarely corresponded. But they have met in the tarsands, though still to a limited degree."

It's not hard to see the benefit for European environmental groups in putting the historically disadvantaged face of Canadian aboriginals on their campaigns. A key challenge of selling the urgency of the climate-change issue is that it has historically existed abstractly, with doomful warnings, but minimal evidence of any human toll.

"I think it's a little bit hard to visualize carbon emissions, but when you can actually see toxic tailing ponds and how it can leach into the water that you're drinking, that has an effect," says Melina Lubicon-Massimo, a campaigner for Greenpeace in Alberta and a Lubicon Cree. "People are starting to realize how their quality of life can be impacted from this development, and the air quality and the water quality."

Last month, the U.K.-based environmentalist group PLATFORM helped arrange for members of the Mikisew Cree First Nation and the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, who live downstream of oil sands operations, to travel to Climate Camp in London, England, where together they protested against BP and Shell investing in Alberta. The

natives appalled their European hosts with stories of allegedly poisoned water, contaminated fish, and the cancers and diseases they suffer from being so near to the oil sands.

Carrying banners reading, "Tar Sands Oil is Blood Oil," the "indigenous tribespeople," as one U.K. report described them, exhorted the crowd: "When I say 'BP,' you say, 'Criminal!'"

With their aim of denormalizing the oil sands, it helps both groups that most people overseas remain unfamiliar with the nuances of what Canadians know to be a complex debate, or that a number of native and environmentalist claims remain hotly disputed.

"I knew nothing a half hour ago," one fellow who stopped to take in the natives' protest confessed to reporters covering the demonstration. Nonetheless, he said what he had learned about the oil sands in that short time was "soul destroying."

In a recent study for the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute, University of Calgary political scientist Tom Flanagan suggests that while environmental groups worldwide have begun attacking oil-sands development, they lack a presence in the very place they're targeting. It only makes sense, then, for environmental groups to team up with "dissident First Nations" (as opposed to bands that support the industry for prosperity it has brought north) to fight the oilpatch on its own turf, he predicts.

In fact, earlier this year, the Indigenous Environmental Network teamed up with Greenpeace and the Rainforest Action Network to offer an "Action Camp" to environmentalists, where attendees travelled to Fort McMurray and learned to build sweatlodges, make bannock and prepare wild game, while taking in seminars on "Tar Sands 101" and "non-violent direct action strategy."

Environmentalists abroad are a particularly receptive audience, says George Poitras, a former chief of the Mikisew Cree in Fort Chipewyan, Alta., and now the band's consultation co-ordinator. He was a speaker at London's Climate Camp, and a number of non-governmental organizations are helping arrange for him to join a speaking tour at universities across Europe this fall.

"What's happening in the tarsands, the issues or claims being made by Fort Chipewyan are not being addressed by the government of Alberta, or Canada for that matter," he says. "That's why we need to continue to internationalize our issues and concerns."

With environmental consciousness so fashionable in Western Europe, and its citizens and corporations having nothing like the stake in oil sands prosperity Canadians have, politicians and industrialists there might certainly be more easily persuaded to boycott them, not least when the issue can be reframed as one of aboriginal human rights.

Though some aboriginal scholars condemn the phenomenon as exploitative, for anti-industry natives, the alliance, whatever its ethics, brings credibility, organization and money they might otherwise lack in facing off against rich oil firms and governments, while less-sympathetic international NGOs capitalize on the image of a victimized people.

At his band's pow-wow this summer, Chief Lameman referred to his as a "David and Goliath struggle." It was, as it happens, the very day he accepted a six-figure cheque and the avowed support of a European organization with 4.5 million members and \$125-billion in assets.

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