

### **Canim Lake Band Tsq'escen: The Problem of Timber Dependency**

Wovoka, the Paiute messiah who brought the Ghost Dance to the people in 1889, once said this about participation in the capitalist economic system:

“You ask me to plow the ground. Shall I take a knife and tear my mother's bosom? Then when I die she will not take me to her bosom to rest. You ask me to dig for stones! Shall I dig under her skin for bones? Then when I die I cannot enter her body to be born again. You ask me to cut grass and make hay and sell it and be rich like white men, but how dare I cut my mother's hair?”

As native people, we come into conflict with traditional values when we exploit natural resources, even though doing so may be to our economic advantage, or in some cases necessary for our economic survival. Currently, many native communities rely on natural resources such as coal, timber, oil and uranium to support themselves. The only enterprise owned by my band of 568 enrolled members, the Tsq'escen Band of Shuswap from Canim Lake, British Columbia, is the Teniye Logging Company. Timber dependency gives rise to a host of problems for my people including: undiversified economic dependence on a single commodity, reliance on an unsustainable resource, pipelining of our people into the unskilled labor force, lack of educational aspiration, and loss of culture.

The financial success of my tribe hinges on the market for a single commodity product. This is a big risk. Demand for any commodity will shift over time. Before the housing crash, timber was relatively lucrative because it is the main raw material in construction. Following the economic downturn, demand for timber plummeted and sawmills in Canada operated at 45% of capacity in the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of 2009 (TMC Net). In

addition to the challenges of decreased demand, the quality of our timber is at risk. We are in the midst of a mountain pine beetle epidemic. Wood quality is declining rapidly, and foresters must harvest quickly or lose revenue. According to one report, mountain pine beetle populations are expected to grow 80% by 2013 (Stickney). My timber-dependent community is vulnerable to two forces that we have no control over: the whims of a worldwide timber market, and the hungry mouth of a foreign pest.

By nature, a timber economy is a bad match for a small community because timber resources are subject to depletion. Admittedly, woodlands re-grow over time, however it takes decades for trees to mature and become harvestable. For larger logging companies, reforestation is a lesser consideration because they have vast forests at their disposal. However, for smaller enterprises like ours, the interim between harvests can be longer because of limited woodlands on—and adjacent to—tribal lands. Therefore, although timber is considered a renewable resource, due to land constraints, the forest is not continuously or quickly renewable for my people.

The timber industry does nothing to promote or encourage higher education among my people. Most of the available forestry jobs require only a high school education. Higher pay, higher skill forestry jobs on the reserve may require an industry certificate, which is a far cry from a university degree. As a consequence, most First Nations youth from my community do not see any reason to pursue higher education. The timber industry provides employment that enables my people to sustain their families and remain on the reserve where they feel comfortable. Meanwhile, there is no incentive to pursue higher education and develop the skills to prosper in an increasingly competitive and educated global economy.

Lack of education contributes to loss of culture. Because my people have essentially been pipelined into the bottom tier of society by capitalist interests looking to exploit cheap and available labor as well as by historically anti-indigenous government policies (that pushed to assimilate and/or exterminate Indian people through the Residential Schools and Reservations), they have lost much of their culture. Traditional values have been replaced with consumerist values. The hours of satellite television consumed in a reservation household would scare even the most dedicated marketing VP. The most recent available statistics indicate that the average child aged 2-11 in British Columbia watches 14.4 hours of TV per week. I am going to estimate that kids at Canim Lake, where books are few and far between, double those numbers. My grandmother, Toni Archie, spends 6 hours per week teaching the Secwepemcstin language at the Eliza Archie elementary school and day care. This means that the ratio of TV hours to Secwepemcstin hours is something like 4:1. My people are trading their unique identity as Tsq'escen people for *American Idol*, *Guitar Hero* and *The Simpsons*.

Discussing and identifying a resolution to timber dependency and its side effects requires a higher understanding of economics than I possess. Fortunately, economics is one of the subjects that I plan to pursue in undergraduate and graduate school. With a university education, I stand a better chance of effectively addressing problems related to timber dependency than I do as a seventeen year-old high school student. For me to take on such a large challenge at such a young age would be not only preposterous but also contradictory to the traditional value of humility. For these reasons, I believe that my first step in addressing timber dependency is to attend university and pursue a degree that

gives me the expertise to contribute to the understanding and resolution of the Canim Lake band's economic challenges.

I cannot achieve anything alone. More of the youth from my community need to pursue post-secondary education. My tribe, like many, suffers from a lack of higher education. Only 24 percent of our workforce of 350 people hold any type of post-secondary degree or certificate. Of this 24 percent, 15 percent hold trade certificates. This means that only 9 percent of the workforce on the reservation have an undergraduate or graduate diploma and/or certificate (Christopher). By increasing the education level, we increase informed dialogue about realistic options for solving timber dependency and other social/economic problems. Education could also give us more job opportunities and pull our people out of the lower classes, thereby reducing timber dependency as we found employment in other industries that would diversify the income base of the reservation. However, with higher education and new job skills, some of our people may be motivated to pursue employment opportunities elsewhere. This phenomenon, known as a "brain drain" is common in developing communities. One way to prevent the brain drain would be for our newly educated populous to become entrepreneurs, opening profitable and sustainable businesses in the South Cariboo region of British Columbia. I can only hope that our Tsq'escen people who have lived near Canim Lake, deriving our sustenance from the land for generations, will value our community, each other and this place enough to fully apply ourselves and our skill sets to help the community at Canim Lake before all others.

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