

Research Article

When Worlds Collide: Critical Minerals and the Fate of the Maymayquayshwak Anishinaabe in Ontario, Canada

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Abstract: Now, more than ever, critical minerals are in demand. However, in the rush to bring these resources to market, mining can have severe, adverse impacts on the people who use and enjoy the places where these minerals are found. The Maymayquayshwak Anishinaabe who reside in Ni da tak keem nah^m (our land), a remote region in Northwestern Ontario, are a telling example. Also known as the North Spirit Lake First Nation, the community is contending with a mining company whose operations in their territory pose an existential threat to their way of life. This article describes their plight and how the duty to consult Indigenous Canadians about industrial developments in their Territories failed in this case.

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Enthusiastic partisans of the idea of progress are in danger of failing to recognize—because they set so little store by them—the immense riches accumulated by the human race on either side of the narrow furrow on which they keep their eyes fixed, by underrating the achievements of the past they devalue all those which still remain to be accomplished.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, 393

Critical Minerals

The importance of lithium, cobalt, nickel, aluminum, manganese, and other “critical minerals” in the battle against the climate crisis is undeniable. While the use of rechargeable batteries containing these minerals has become widespread since the advent of lithium-ion batteries in 1991,¹ in the aftermath of the 2015 *Paris Agreement*,² in which almost 200 nations³ pledged “to fight against climate change through ... the mitigation of greenhouse gases,” the demand for critical minerals has reached unprecedented levels.⁴

Provincial Support and the Protect Ontario by Unleashing our Economy Act, 2025

Mindful of the accelerating demand, Ontario Premier Doug Ford not only referred to the discovery of lithium and other critical minerals in Northwestern Ontario as a “generational” economic opportunity for the province, but also “has repeatedly vowed to accelerate mining in the remote region to supply future electric-vehicle and battery factories in the south.”⁵ In order to accomplish that goal, on 10 May 2023, the provincial legislature passed the *Building More Mines Act*, with a purpose “to expedite permitting times and approvals to put more new mines into production more quickly.”⁶

More recently, Premier Ford doubled down on his promise to accelerate mining in the region. In March 2025 the premier told representatives from the mining industry, at the annual conference of the Prospectors and Developers Association of Canada, that threats to the nation’s national security demanded immediate action. “We cannot afford to add years and years of delays, massive costs to critical mineral projects so that the federal government can waste time repeating and replicating assessments that Ontario has already done,” Ford told attendees from Canada and abroad.⁷

Enabling legislation followed three months later, on 5 June 2025, when the provincial legislature passed Bill 5, *Protect Ontario by Unleashing our Economy Act*, which modified several existing acts largely to promote “prospecting, registration of mining claims and exploration for the development of mineral resources ...

consistent with the protection of Ontario's economy."⁸ Bill 5 also empowered the provincial government to create "special economic zones" in which mines could be brought into production more rapidly by suspending existing municipal and provincial laws and regulations.⁹ Although one month later, faced with mounting pressure from First Nations leaders,¹⁰ the Ford government stated that Bill 5 was not intended to diminish constitutionally protected treaty and Aboriginal rights,¹¹ the premier reminded critics that, "I was crystal clear about getting rid of the red tape, getting rid of the regulations, making sure that we attract investments."¹²

Federal Support and the Building Canada Act, 2025

In the meantime, high-ranking federal officials also vowed "to make government move faster and more efficiently in expediting approvals to put more Canadian mines into production ahead of the quickening global demand for critical minerals."¹³ To that end, on 9 December 2022 the federal minister of natural resources released the Canadian Critical Minerals Strategy, which announced that nearly four billion dollars would be provided "for Canada to become a global supplier of choice for critical minerals and the clean digital technologies they enable."¹⁴ Two years later, in October 2024, the federal government "announced up to \$13.8 million in funding, pending final due diligence from Natural Resources Canada, for five critical minerals infrastructure developments in Northwestern Ontario,"¹⁵ four of which are in support of lithium mines.¹⁶

The momentum to develop the critical mineral wealth of Northern Ontario received a further boost when the *Building Canada Act*, which is part of Bill C-5, the *One Canadian Economy Act*, came into effect on 26 June 2025.¹⁷ According to the federal government, the purpose of the legislation is to "get projects of national interest built by focusing on a small number of executable projects and shifting the focus of federal reviews from 'whether' to build these projects to 'how' to best advance them."¹⁸ To qualify, proposed projects must, among other things, "enhance Canada's prosperity, national security, economic security, national defence [and] national autonomy."¹⁹

According to Prime Minister Mark Carney, critical mineral undertakings in Northern Ontario are an example. Although no ventures of this sort were included in the five "nation-building" projects the prime minister referred to the Major Projects Office²⁰ on 11 September 2025, a background document accompanying the announcement noted that exploiting the critical mineral wealth of Northern Ontario was likely to be included in the next tranche of endeavours the prime minister intends to recommend to the Major Projects Office—"to create business development teams to work with provinces, territories, proponents, and Indigenous Peoples to further develop and make these nation-building projects a reality."²¹ As the government declared in the background document:

Canada can be a powerhouse in the extraction and upgrading of critical minerals for industries that can emerge in Canada and to diversify and serve export markets. A priority for the Major Projects Office will be to get more critical minerals projects get to final investment decisions, with a focus on sustainability and regulatory certainty. This will enable critical mineral proponents working with Indigenous and local communities, investors, and provinces and territories to develop projects in regions like the Fosse du Labrador in QC and NL, the Northwest Critical Mineral and Conservation Corridor in BC, and the Ring of Fire in [Northern] Ontario ... developing ‘mines to magnets’ using our rare earth resources and building processing and manufacturing abilities; and refining and processing minerals needed for clean energy and electricity battery storage, as well as electric vehicles.²²

An Existential Threat

However, despite assurances from federal officials and the Ontario premier²³ that potential projects should “advance the interests of Indigenous peoples ... [via a process] that allows for the active and meaningful participation of the affected Indigenous peoples”²⁴ in the decision-making process, there is no consensus among the First Nations in Northern Ontario about how best to proceed. While some Anishinaabe²⁵ who use and occupy the land where critical minerals are found support the new federal and provincial initiatives, other Anishinaabe consider the exploitation of the metals that have caused so much optimism in Canada and abroad²⁶ an existential threat.²⁷

Among the latter are the Maymayquayshwak, a community composed of about 290²⁸ predominantly Oji-Cree speaking Anishinaabe²⁹ who reside in the North Spirit Lake First Nation community,³⁰ Ni da tak keem nah^m (our land), at the southwest tip of North Spirit Lake (see Figure 1), about an hour and a half northwest of Thunder Bay by air (see Figure 2). What alarms community members is that efforts undertaken by Frontier Lithium³¹—“to complete final permitting, metallurgical test work and ... feasibility [studies] in 2025 to make [a final] construct[ion] decision for an [open-pit] mine, mill and downstream chemical plant at its PAK (Pakeagama) site to produce lithium chemicals”³²—will destroy their way of life. The issue is all the more pressing, they say, because Frontier Lithium has identified three additional, economically feasible deposits of lithium-bearing minerals in the First Nation’s territory, which it plans to develop:

two adjacent to the PAK site and another 30 km away (see Figure 3). These deposits pose further threats to that way of life. Nor has the company given the Maymayquayshwak any indication that it understands their concerns.

The purpose of this article is to contribute to the scholarship on extractive industries and Indigenous harvesting practices in the North³³ via an ethnological account of the Maymayquayshwak way of life, featuring a father and son who abide by its tenets. This is accompanied by a chronicle of Frontier Lithium’s failure to engage the community in a meaningful dialogue about the adverse impacts of the company’s activities on their way of life. Like other students of ethnology, our goal is to portray the world from “the other” point of view³⁴—to achieve what the great, pioneer anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) wrote, was “the final goal, of which an Ethnographer [ethnologist] should never lose sight ... to grasp the [other’s] point of view, [their] relation to life, to realise [*their*] vision of [*their*] world.”³⁵



Figure 1. Photo of North Spirit Lake First Nation, Village site reproduced with permission of Destiny Rae. Source: Destiny Rae.



Figure 2. Map of North Spirit Lake First Nation location in Northwestern Ontario. Sources: Reg Nelson, Lakehead University, Geospatial Data Centre, NaturalEarthData.com, Canada Atlas Lambert.

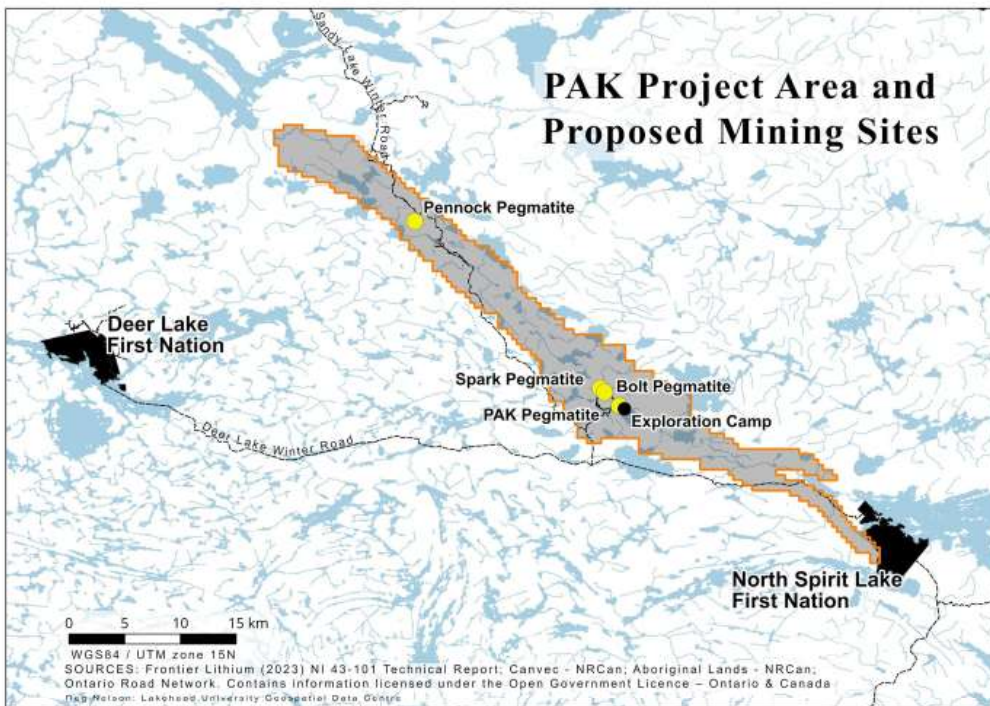


Figure 3. Map of Frontier Lithium claims and proposed mine sites in relation to the North Spirit Lake and Deer Lake village sites. Sources: Reg Nelson, Lakehead University Geospatial Data Centre, Frontier Lithium (2023) NI 43-101 Technical Report: Canvec - NRCAN, Aboriginal Lands - NRCAN, Ontario Road Network. Contains information licensed under the Open Government Licence - Ontario & Canada.

Anishinaabe-Bimaadiziwin

The Maymayquayshwak call their way of life Anishinaabe-Bimaadiziwin, which means living in the Anishinaabe way, directly off the land, like their ancestors, by hunting, trapping, fishing, and gathering, and as twenty-first century people. Since time out of mind, the Maymayquayshwak have moved through their territory in a remote region of Northwestern Ontario (see Figure 4) in concert with the ebb and flow of the seasons, in an annual round that enabled them to maximize their returns from the environment and simultaneously conserve resources for the future, in pursuit of a meaningful and fulfilling way of life.³⁶ Combined with their cumulative cultural knowledge and formidable survival skills, moving through their territory in this way made it possible for the Maymayquayshwak to depend on the proceeds indefinitely. Like their Anishinaabe counterparts elsewhere in the boreal forest, those from North Spirit Lake were (and are) “adept at steadying a beaver snare with a loop or grass, at aging tracks, at noticing the broken bits of sedge at the mouth of a stream, always learning about climate, landscape, and animal behavior ... in a complex and skill-demanding setting ... [where each] forager has a history, built on experience and always engaged with the changes of the moment.”³⁷

The 1910 Adhesion to *Treaty Number 5, 1875*

It was with the goal of maintaining their relationship with the land that Chief Robert Fiddler from Deer Lake, who served as ogimaa-giigdo,³⁸ or Chief Speaker, during negotiations for the final adhesion (1910) to *Treaty Number Five, 1875*, informed Treaty Commissioner John T. Semmens³⁹ that the Chiefs and leaders, who had gathered at Deer Lake on 9 June 1910 to parlay with Semmens, had decided to accept the government’s offer.⁴⁰

Also known as the Lake Winnipeg Treaty, *Treaty Number Five, 1875* originated with the mid-nineteenth century “push to extinguish aboriginal title to the agricultural land of the Prairies.”⁴¹ Although the consensus among scholars is that the Cree and Ojibwe-speaking Anishinaabe who originally endorsed the agreement in 1875 “valued their harvesting life,” almost all also acknowledge that the Chiefs and leaders who endorsed the agreement “were not blind to the necessity for change in the face of non-Native settlement and economic restructuring. They believed the treaties would provide the means to survive the anticipated dislocations.”⁴²

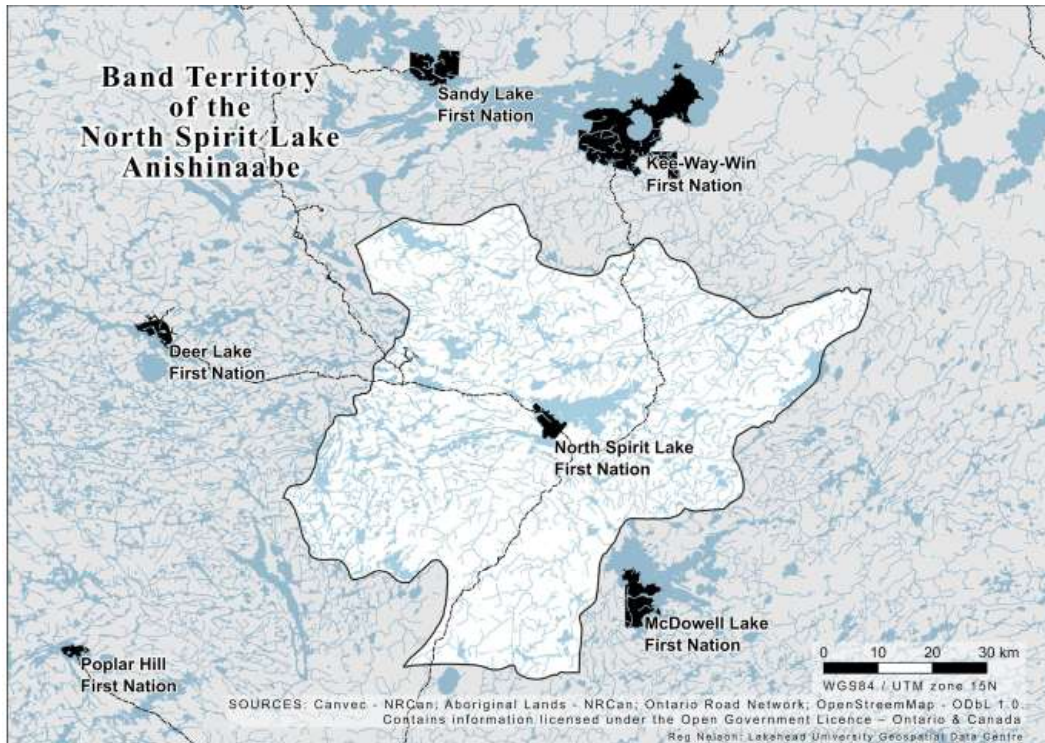


Figure 4. Map of Band Territory of the North Spirit Lake First Nation.

Source: Reg Nelson, Lakehead University Geospatial Data Centre, Canvec - NRCAn; Aboriginal Lands - NRCAn; Ontario Road Network; OpenstreetMap.

The leaders who endorsed the 1910 adhesion, including those who represented the Maymayquayshwak, believed otherwise. In the remote region of Northwestern Ontario where Oji-Cree speakers such as the Maymayquayshwak resided, Anishinaabe-Bimaadiziwin prevailed. At the time, like neighbouring bands in the newly ceded territory, the Maymayquayshwak reached their maximum size in spring, when the otherwise detached, extended families⁴³ that comprised the community congregated to take spawning walleye and northern pike at the lower reaches of the rivers and streams that served as their highways to and from the interior. And when spring gave way to summer, people set up camps at various locations on the shores of North Spirit Lake and other, smaller lakes in their territory, where they spent their time fishing, collecting plants for medicine and food, welcoming visitors from other Nations, participating in contests and games, and performing the sacred ceremonies that linked them with the spirit world.

Later, when the leaves began to fall, after taking on a supply of whitefish and lake trout to sustain them when the weather turned cold, people broke camp, and the families who comprised the community, each usually containing from five to fifteen people, separated and headed inland to their individual family winter hunting grounds in the interior. There the men set their traps and went after large game such as moose and woodland caribou, while the women maintained the

camp and killed small game and fished. The hunters and their families remained in their winter quarters until breakup in the spring, when open water enabled the people to return to their fishing grounds and begin the cycle anew.⁴⁴

In the meantime, the details of living off the land as a moral and ethical endeavour had to be mastered—boys and girls schooled in the intricacies of their culture by their Elders, who taught them that, above all, they must respect what the land and water provided, and that the earth was a sentient entity that had thoughts and feelings and was capable of choice.⁴⁵ The Elders relied on the spoken word to educate youth about these matters, via sacred narratives that called attention to the social and cultural as well as the economic dimensions of living off the land.

To be sure, there have been changes in Anishinaabe-Bimaadiziwin since the adhesion to *Treaty Number Five, 1875* was endorsed, especially since the end of the Second World War (1939–1945), when the introduction of “programs such as schooling for the young, health services for all, and retraining programs prevented the Indians from remaining in the bush during the winter,” had an adverse impact on traditional methods of education based on participant observation and apprenticeship in the bush.⁴⁶ As a result, by the last quarter of the twentieth century, the wealth that the Maymayquayshwak and members of neighbouring communities produced through living off the land had been eclipsed by a cash economy and commercial exchange.

Peripheral Market and Peripheral Subsistence Economies

A Peripheral Market Economy

Since time out of mind, although the Maymayquayshwak traded with their neighbours, and later with Europeans, the foundation of the community’s economy was hunting, trapping, fishing, and gathering, whose products typically were shared in accord with the principle of reciprocity. The principle holds that gifts are bestowed with the expectation that these will be returned, although the nature and timing of the recompense depends on the relationship between the principals; the closer the connection, the less need for commensurate action.⁴⁷

An economy that is heavily weighted in this way—in favour of gift-giving rather than commercial exchange—is known as a peripheral market economy, an apt term since, from the point of view “of the community, market sales are not the dominant source of material livelihood ... [Instead,] most people are not engaged in producing for the market, or those who are so engaged are only part-time marketers. [Rather, their] livelihood comes largely from [the] non-market [or subsistence] sphere of their economy.”⁴⁸ In the case of the Maymayquayshwak, products were shared in a manner that helped ensure the health and well-being

of the whole, “especially,” as one early observer noted, “as it often happens that a single hunter provides food for several families, which, but for his aid, would, at certain times and at certain places, perish of hunger and want.”⁴⁹

A Peripheral Subsistence Economy

However, when the annual round of the Maymayquayshwak was disrupted in the middle of the twentieth century, the local economy was transformed from a peripheral market economy into a peripheral subsistence economy. Like a peripheral market economy, a peripheral subsistence economy generates wealth via traditional subsistence activities such as hunting, fishing, and gathering, and non-subsistence market endeavours of various sorts. The difference between these is that, whereas most of the wealth that is produced in a peripheral market economy is derived from traditional subsistence endeavours, most of the wealth that is produced in a peripheral subsistence economy is produced via non-subsistence, market endeavours such as wage labour.

In a system of this sort, while the production, distribution, and exchange of goods and services is based primarily on supply and demand, a smaller share of the economy nonetheless continues to be governed by the principle of reciprocity. Such is the case in the North Spirit Lake First Nation today.

Darcy and Brandon: Consummate Moose Hunters

Peripheral does not mean unimportant.⁵⁰ Despite the transition to a predominantly market economy, Anishinaabe-Bimaadiziwin continues to function as one of the most important unifying themes in the cultural lives of the Maymayquayshwak. This is especially true for men who are committed to the principle that their responsibilities include “not only the business of hunting, for this is an *employment* and not a *pastime*, but [also] the care of the territory and keeping off intruders and enemies ... [and for the women who are their partners, who are responsible for] cooking and dressing meats and fowl, and whatever else the chase affords ... [as well as] the entire care and controul [sic] of the lodge.”⁵¹

Among these men are thirty-year-old Brandon Rae, the current Chief of the North Spirit Lake First Nation, and his forty-eight-year-old father, Darcy Kejick. Like his father before him, Darcy began to tutor his son in the intricacies of Anishinaabe-Bimaadiziwin when Brandon was a child (see Figure 5), overseeing his son’s progress from acolyte to expert. This began with the lesson that the

resources Anishinaabe depend on to survive are best understood as species composed of other-than-human persons, each species overseen by its own “spirit master,” or ogima, who controls access to its underlings.⁵²

Generally thought to be of equal rank, in practice some spirit masters are more powerful than others. The transcendental entities that control access to natural resource harvests such as moose, lake trout, and beaver, for example, are held in higher regard than those that dwell in trees and rocks, although these also are revered. Brandon also was taught that, if a spirit master takes umbrage with anything a forager does, the spectre may punish the offender by refusing to make its kind available to be harvested, or by causing the transgressor’s hunting, trapping, fishing, and gathering equipment to malfunction. As ethnologist Irving Hallowell learned from the Berens River Anishinaabe: “Guns and traps are of no avail if this spiritual boss of the species is offended and does not wish human beings to obtain his underlings.”⁵³

Beyond that, Brandon was taught that the spirit masters who enabled Anishinaabe to thrive abhorred the accumulation of wealth. As Georg Kohl, a German geographer and ethnologist who visited Anishinaabe on the south shore of Lake Superior in the middle of the nineteenth century learned: “As a universal rule, next to the liar, no one is so despised by the Indians as the ... greedy miser... As long as a man has anything, according to the moral law of the Indians, he must share it with those who want; and no one can attain any degree of respect among them who does not do so most liberally.”⁵⁴ The food that the spirits provided (and provide) was (and is) among those things that must be shared.

Darcy and Brandon abide by the principle. Acknowledged by others as the best hunters in the community, the father and son duo have given thousands of kilograms of moose meat to family and friends in North Spirit Lake and beyond for years, by word of mouth and, more recently, via Facebook (see Figure 6). Like all expert hunters, Darcy and Brandon remember every moose they have killed. They also have kept detailed, written records of their kills on their family trapline since 2008 (see Figure 7), which was five years before Frontier Lithium acquired the rights to develop the lithium deposit at the PAK site, which “encompasses 26,774 hectares” in the immediate vicinity of their trapline, RL 121 (see Figure 8).



Figure 5. Photo of Darcy Kejik and Brandon Rae field dressing a moose they harvested on their family trapline in October, 2020. Reproduced with permission of Darcy Kejik and Brandon Rae.

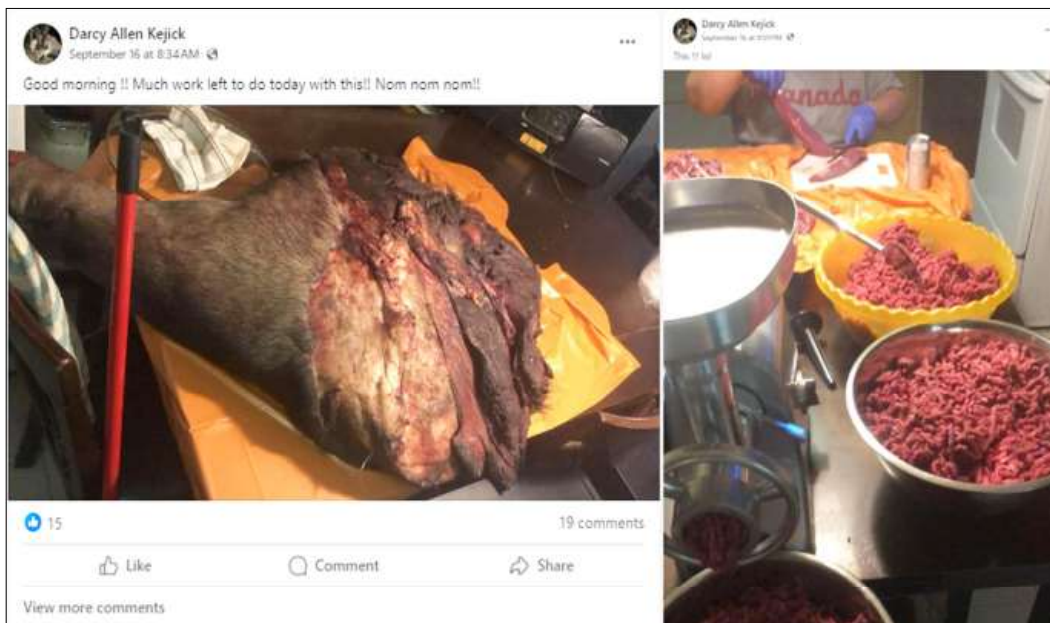


Figure 6. Photo of hunter Darcy Kejick's Facebook posts, sharing moose harvest
Kejik, D., "Good Morning!!," Facebook, September 16, 2024. Reproduced with permission of Darcy Kejick

Figures 9, 10, and 11 are based on Darcy and Brandon's records. Each figure represents a different way of looking at their productivity on an annual basis between 2008 and 2023. Figure 9 shows the number of moose they killed annually during the period, and, as the numbers indicate, Darcy and Brandon have been far less successful since 2017. Between 2008 and 2016 they killed forty moose, but only twelve moose between 2017 and 2023. This amounts to a 72% average annual decline.

Since the number of moose killed has decreased, the total edible weight of the animals also has dropped significantly, and the less meat that Darcy and Brandon are able to share with family and friends. As Figure 10 shows, despite their hunting prowess, Darcy and Brandon produced around one-quarter the amount of moose meat between 2016 and 2023 compared with the period between 2008 and 2015—2,547 kg as opposed to 10,259 kg.

Finally, Figure 11 displays the cash-equivalent values of the moose meat Darcy and Brandon produced between 2008 and 2023, and these likewise show a conspicuous drop beginning in 2017, equivalent to \$21,462 per annum in 2024 dollars. The importance of this cannot be overstated in a place where the “cost of living is high and opportunities are scarce.”⁵⁵ Meanwhile, other hunters in North Spirit Lake report similar downturns beginning in 2017, not only in the number of moose killed, but also in the numbers of waterfowl, fish, and furbearers they take, which likewise are sources of food that also are freely shared.⁵⁶

According to Darcy, Brandon, and other hunters in North Spirit Lake, the reason for the decline is apparent: the increasingly rapid pace of the activities undertaken by Frontier Lithium to achieve the company's goal of opening the mine in 2027. Construction, float planes, helicopters, and motorboats transporting employees and materials to and from the First Nation's territory have altered the movements of animals—so much so that the hunters at North Spirit Lake are no longer able to rely on the ecological algorithms that were key to their success. As a result, everybody in North Spirit Lake has been harmed: think of the hunters whose role as providers has been diminished, and then of the recipients of the presents, which is the community as whole, who not only have suffered an economic setback, but also have less of the natural foods that Anishinaabe say is essential to maintain their physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional health.⁵⁷

To make matters worse, the pace of the development that is threatening to overwhelm the community is nearly certain to continue apace. Of the previously mentioned \$13.8 million in funding to promote five critical mineral projects in Northwestern Ontario, Frontier Lithium was slated to receive the lion's share—\$6.1 million “to advance Indigenous engagement and engineering for a 56-kilometre all-season road and electricity infrastructure for the Pakeagama (PAK) Lithium Project in Northwestern Ontario.”⁵⁸

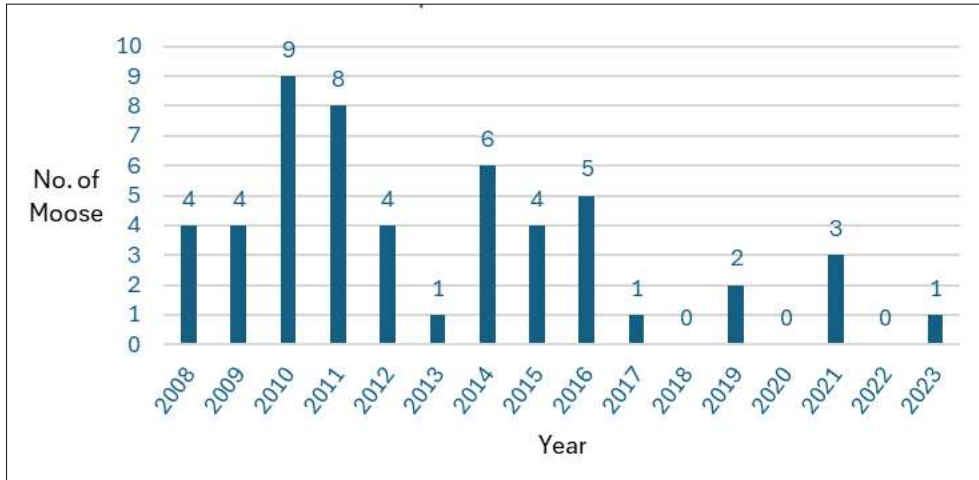


Figure 9. Graph of annual moose harvested by Darcy and Brandon in Trapline RL 121, 2008–2023.

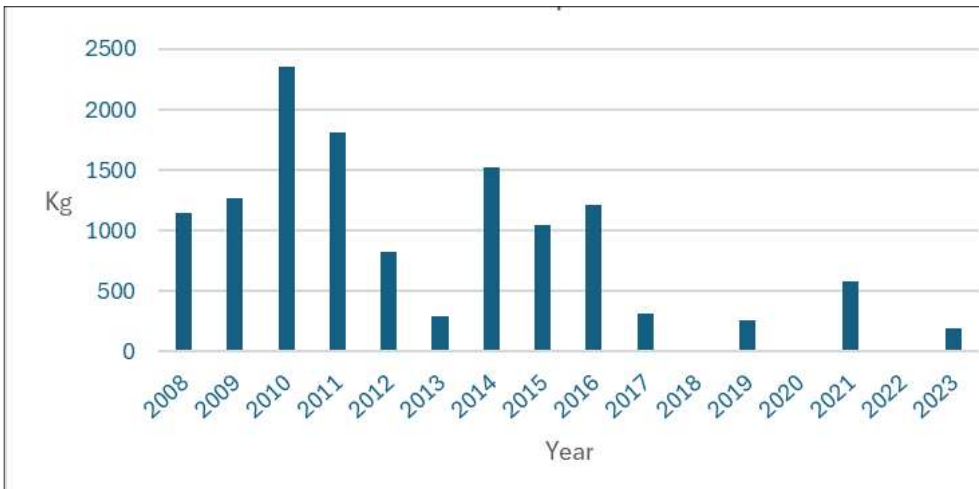


Figure 10. Graph of annual edible weight of moose harvested by Darcy and Brandon in Trapline RL 121, 2008–2023

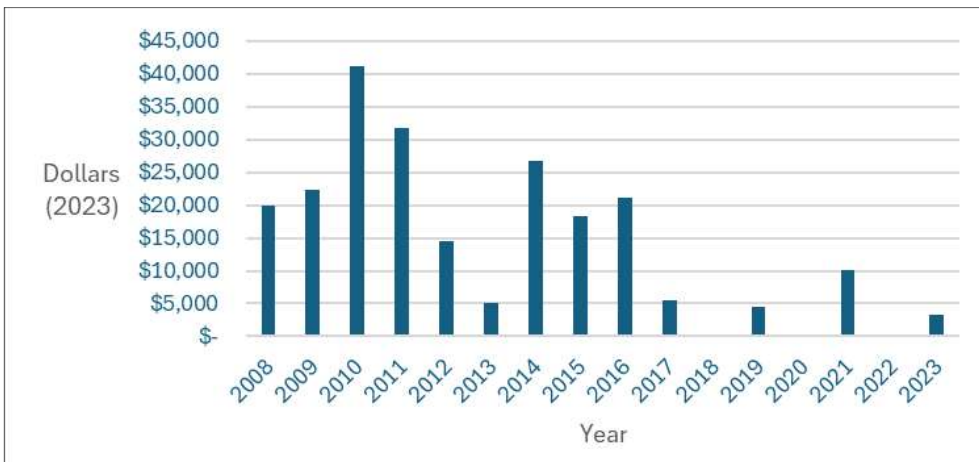


Figure 11. Graph of annual cash equivalent value of moose harvested by Darcy and Brandon in Trapline RL 121, 2008–2023

The Duty to Consult Indigenous People

Between 1990 and 2000, in a series of decisions concerning “lands reserved for Indians,” the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that the honour of the Crown “requires that federal and provincial governments have a dialogue with Indigenous groups about contemplated government actions or decisions that might have a negative impact on Aboriginal and treaty rights. The goal is to listen to the views and concerns of affected Indigenous groups and, where necessary and possible, modify the action or decision to avoid unlawful infringement of those rights...”⁵⁹ Examples include industrial developments “that may affect Indigenous groups’ access to and supply of an animal population, or a change in policy or regulation that restricts land use.”⁶⁰

In such cases, governments can and do assign the duty to consult to the proponent of a project undertaken on property within the authority’s jurisdiction. In Ontario, for instance, while “the ultimate legal responsibility to meet the duty to consult lies with the Crown,”⁶¹ the provincial government has the authority to delegate certain responsibilities to a third party “depending on a variety of factors including the nature of the consultation, the extent of consultation required in the circumstance and the procedural aspects of consultation the Crown has delegated to the third party.”⁶²

To fulfill its legal responsibility, Frontier Lithium advertised that its work in the North Spirit Lake First Nation territory would be guided by six principles: first, recognizing “that Indigenous peoples were the original inhabitants of the land that became Canada”; second, admitting “the special relationship between Indigenous people and the land that has formed over millennia and ... [to] incorporate traditional knowledge into our decisions”; third, committing the company “to sustainability and [to] recognize the need to preserve the environment for use by future generations”; fourth, respecting “that each community has its own distinctive culture, traditions, values and aspirations”; fifth, seeking “to structure our projects in ways that provide social, cultural and economic benefits consistent with the aspirations of those communities with which we partner”; and sixth, engaging in “timely, respectful and meaningful consultation with the goal of achieving free, prior and informed consent on new projects.”⁶³

How Frontier Lithium Exercised the Duty to Consult

It was in the spirit of these promises that current Chief Brandon Rae, Head Trapper of Trapline RL 121, wrote a letter to Frontier Lithium on 6 September 2023 to ask the company to refrain from flying helicopters in the vicinity of his family trapline during the prime moose hunting season (beginning the second week in September and ending the third week in October) that year. The letter reads as follows:

Dear Frontier Lithium,

It has come to my attention that the Frontier Lithium company helicopters are looking to operate during prime moose hunting season. I'm sending this letter to ask that you refrain from flying helicopters in the RL 121 Trapline during Prime moose hunting season. Strictly from the start of the second week of September until the end of the third week of October.

Margot Lake, Flanagan River, Duckling River, Tall Rice Lake, Duckling Lake, Mortely Lake, Whiteloon Lake, Cellist Lake, Lakewood Lake, Two Lakes, are all located in Trapline RL121. These lakes and rivers are used during September and October for moose harvest.

Helicopters are a big issue with our fall harvest as they keep the animals on edge and away from waterways while community members are trying to hunt. We have had issues in the past with other companies flying helicopters during our fall harvest. If they continue to fly during our fall harvest and members cannot proceed to harvest an animal during that time it would then affect our right to hunt. We will have nothing to hunt if the animals have fled the area.

Sincerely,

Brandon Rae, North Spirit Lake First Nation Band Member,
Head Trapper RL121c⁶⁴

There was no response from Frontier Lithium—not by snail mail, email, text message, or voice.

Ignoring the Request

That Frontier Lithium ignored Brandon's request was not unexpected. Speaking in his capacity as Chief, Brandon said that, at best, when it came to the duty to consult, the company simply came to town and told the Chief and Council what it was going to do and that was that. And so, not knowing what to expect, Brandon and two others set out to hunt moose on RL 121 during the prime hunting season in September 2023 (see Figure 12).

One of us (Wilson) went on the trip and wrote about what transpired: After we packed up Brandon's twenty-foot boat with our gear, we travelled down the Flanagan River to the first of four waterfalls, where we portaged the contents of the big boat to smaller, twelve and fourteen-foot boats and continued downriver. Although it is only about 19 km as the crow flies from Brandon's house in the reserve to his camp on Whiteloon Lake, the 35-km, four-hour journey by boat

provided time for us to concentrate on the task at hand. And so, we stayed alert, watching and listening for signs of moose.

As we travelled, thoughts of previous kills rekindled memories of bygone hunts, which we shared with one another on our way to the fourth and final portage, from Tallrice Lake to Whiteloon Lake, where we encountered a boat loaded with scientific equipment belonging to Frontier Lithium at the landing. The presence of the boat completely altered our mood. There was no more talk of moose; instead, we spoke about nothing but the boat at the landing while we made our way to Brandon's camp on Whiteloon Lake, where we spent the night.

The following day, no sooner had we started than we saw a boat in the middle of the lake. After thinking things over, we decided to approach the boat and find out what the occupants were doing. The crew, which was from Frontier Lithium, included a company representative who said they were collecting water samples from the lake. After a lengthy, and frequently heated conversation, the representative told Brandon that he had received his request to stay away while Brandon hunted, but decided that the use of a motorboat would not disrupt the hunt. Brandon told the representative that he was mistaken, and that he would appreciate it if Frontier Lithium stayed away from his trapline until hunting season was over. While we were speaking, a helicopter flew overhead on its way to the company's helipad.

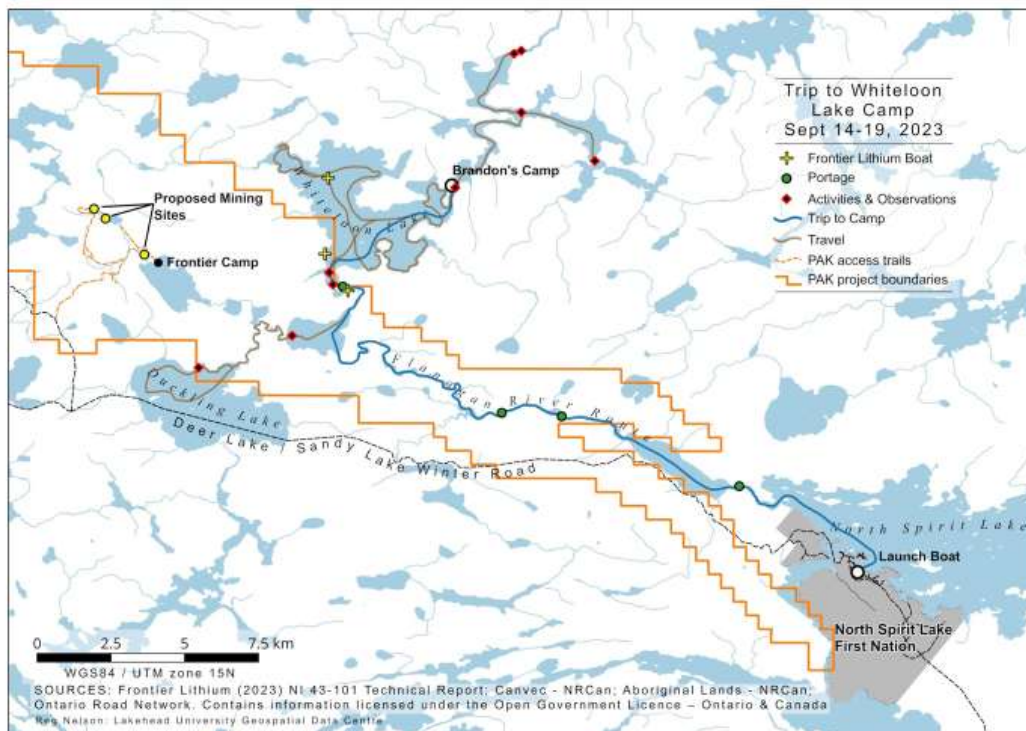


Figure 12. Sketch map of trip with highlights. Source: Reg Nelson, Lakehead University Geospatial Data Centre, Frontier Lithium (2023) NI 43-101 Technical Report: Canvec - NRCan; Aboriginal Lands - NRCan; Ontario Road Network. Contains information licensed under the Open Government Licence - Ontario & Canada

Given the disruption, Brandon suggested that our best option was to travel downriver in search of moose. But none were sighted, and so, after two days without success, we headed back to Brandon's camp where we encountered Frontier Lithium staff in a motorboat collecting data again.

In the end, the four of us returned empty handed. Bad luck? In 2024, Frontier Lithium stayed away from North Spirit Lake during the six-week period when moose hunting is at its best. Better results: Darcy killed three moose, whose meat he promptly shared with family and friends.

Aftermath

Although atypical, the company's concession to stay away was not unexpected considering that the date for the decision to move ahead with the mine was fast approaching. To that end, Frontier Lithium announced that a successful preliminary feasibility study was completed; that a pilot mining project demonstrated the proposed mine was financially viable; that four discoveries of lithium-bearing ore were identified on the company's property, two of which lent themselves to open-pit mining; that a joint venture with Mitsubishi Corporation to develop the first fully integrated lithium mining and processing operation in Ontario was established; and that the company had established and maintained "Indigenous Partnerships focused on proximal Oji-Cree Communities consistent with our Indigenous Principles."⁶⁵

The Maymayquayshwak see things otherwise. As far as they are concerned, Frontier Lithium is an existential threat, which was made abundantly clear on 7 November 2024, when company representatives made a presentation to the community in the school gymnasium in the North Spirit Lake First Nation. It was the first time company representatives had spoken to Maymayquayshwak as a whole in several years, and when band members heard about the company's plans, they were shocked, angered, and dismayed. The presentation consisted of a fourteen-page PowerPoint presentation that discussed where Frontier Lithium intended to remove and process lithium bearing ore. What company representatives failed to do was to come prepared with illustrations that showed the size of the sites from which the minerals would be removed, something the Chief and Council had requested in September. Although the Chief said the presenters "had to scramble," they were able to piece together a rough image that showed "how big the frontier lithium Pakeagama and spark project pits would be" relative to the point of land on which their houses are located.⁶⁶

In Chief Rae's summary of the meeting, which he posted on Facebook, he wrote that, when the "images were shown, there was gasps heard due to just how large these pits would be." The Chief also wrote that,

after the company's presentation, I asked our people if they had received enough information to decide whether they would agree to move forward with the proposed projects in our territory - Frontier lithium standing in the gym as I asked the question. The people responded NO. They did not receive enough information from the company to be able to make an informed decision. WE NEED MORE INFORMATION.⁶⁷

So does Frontier Lithium, about a way of life that is in peril.

Last Word

Considering the remote location where the Maymayquayshwak live, and the race to produce lithium for the transition to a clean energy world, no wonder First Nations members are fearful that the proposed lithium mine in their territory not only will have severe, adverse impacts on their economic, social, cultural, and spiritual lives, but ultimately will destroy their way of life—not in one fell swoop, but by degrees, out of sight and out of mind in the wilderness.

While the outcome remains to be seen, it is worthwhile to point out that the future is of our own making, and that Frontier Lithium can choose to repair its broken relationship with the Maymayquayshwak, hopefully with the honour of the Crown uppermost in mind as Prime Minister Mark Carney said when he addressed First Nations, Inuit, and Métis leaders about Indigenous involvement in the decision-making process regarding industrial development in the North.⁶⁸ The federal and provincial governments also have the power to intervene. In the meantime, the duty to consult remains in effect. Although the mechanism is imperfect, there have been instances in which the process has accommodated Indigenous interests.⁶⁹

For our part, we believe that the contents of this article demonstrate that the Indigenous perspective must inform the decision-making process, and that ethnology can play a strong, supporting role in calling attention to that perspective. As Franz Boas (1858–1942), one of the founders of modern anthropology, put it almost a century ago: “Anthropology is often considered a collection of curious facts, It is looked upon as an entertaining diversion, apparently without any bearing upon the conduct of life of [so-called] civilized-communities. This opinion is mistaken ... [A] clear understanding of the principles of anthropology illuminates the social processes of our own times and may show us, if we are ready to listen to its teachings, what to do and what to avoid.”⁷⁰

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70. Franz Boas, *Anthropology and Modern Life* (W. W. Norton, 1928), <https://archive.org/details/anthropologymode00boas/page/10>. Also see Thomas Hylland Erikson, *Overheating: An Anthropology of Accelerated Change* (Pluto Press, 2016) and Tim Ingold, *Anthropology: Why it Matters* (Politybooks.com, 2018).