

Keepers of the Water Community Engagement Report for Mountain Cree (Small Boy) Camp

Written by Autumn EagleSpeaker

Together in early October of 2022, Keepers of the Water journeyed to the Mountain Cree Camp community in northwestern Alberta. This traditional, isolated community is located deep within the Rocky Mountains near Nordegg, Alberta.



KOW and Mountain Cree camp community members met in Hinton, Alberta and journeyed three hours together deep into the bush and mountains. Before we began our trip, we pulled over on the side of the road and traditionalist David Cree offered smudge and prayer for a safe journey for our caravan of visitors. After our prayers were offered up, two eagles flew high overhead as if blessing our trip.

We learned from Mountain Cree members that in 1968 Chief John Small Boy led his community of 140 to abandon the Ermineskin First Nation to escape deteriorating social and political conditions on the reserve. The Chief attributed the rampant alcoholism, drug abuse and suicide in his people to being forced to live their lives on a reservation. The Chief had petitioned Ottawa for assistance for his people, but this fell on deaf ears. Chief Smallboy could only find one solution: to take his followers away from the harmful environment and embrace a more natural way of life. Based upon the principles of his Forefathers, he decided to abandon the Ermineskin Reserve for the future of his children and grandchildren. He set out for a peaceful life in a place far from the influences of the modern world. Initially, the camp was set up at Abrahamson Lake but then moved to its current location.

The community consisted of a large council tipi, living tents and a portable classroom to ensure students could still receive a good education. There was no electricity, running water, or anything modern in the community. ¹

¹ "Robert Smallboy." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 22 Aug. 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Smallboy.



Today, the community has approximately 125 residents, and even though it now has access to some modernities, the community maintains its traditional ways. After the school was built in 2009, it began supplying residents with limited power through its generator. There is still no running water or plumbing in Mountain Cree camp. Community members must gather their water for everyday use, including drinking water, from the nearby creek, a fifteen-minute walk, or river, a twenty-minute drive away. Community members shower at the school.

We journeyed toward the community along the long, bustling ring road full of traffic, RVs and long-haul trucks. At our second stop, atop a tall hill, community members pointed out a large area that showed the devastating effects of resource exploitation; clear-cutting timber.

To access Mountain Cree Camp, you must drive past the Vista Coal Mine. This large open pit mine is an eyesore against the beautiful rocky mountain backdrop of forest, rivers and trees. Open in 2019. This mine produces thermal coal, the world's dirtiest coal extraction and burning form. The extraction process also requires enormous of water while the by-product produces high concentrations of selenium, often found downstream in water systems. This mining process directly affects the Mountain Cree camp community residents who depend on untreated river water for their only source of drinking water and way of life.



We stopped for lunch at a traditional camping spot, listening to Elders share stories and traditional knowledge about the area and the community's history. Nearby, a fenced grave sat amongst the bushes to memorialize those who have journeyed on. The camping spot was a site traditionally used for hunting and trapping. With bellies full, we traveled on.

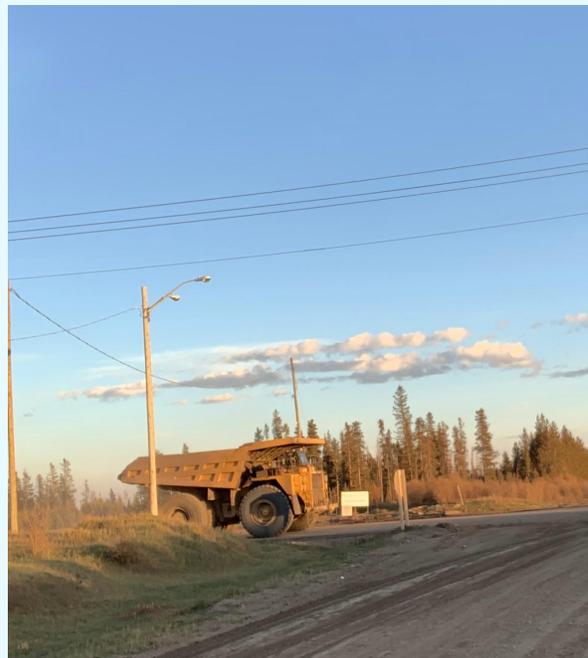


A herd of wild horses greeted our vehicle as they crossed the road from the bush. We took in their majesty and beauty as they sauntered one by one. Though beautiful in sight, these would be the only large animals seen during the six-hour trip.

We arrived at Mountain Cree Camp at the home of resident Roanne Roan. While visiting, Kee[ers of the Water staff conducted six interviews with community members, elders and youth. The interviews were to gather information about life in Mountain Cree Camp, the importance of protecting water, living a traditional lifestyle, and understanding the effects of the coal mining operations in proximity to this community. We also wanted to understand firsthand what it means to live in a traditional community away

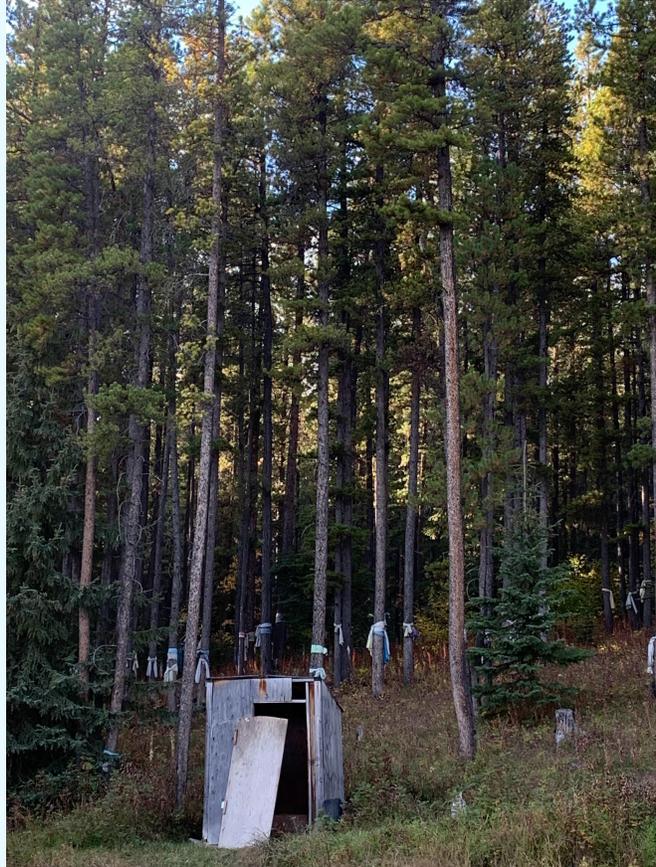
from modern ways. The youth spoke passionately about their upbringing and the importance of safeguarding their community for future generations.

As the sun began to set, we packed up to leave Mountain Cree Camp, having a three-hour drive back to Hinton. We saw more land destruction and resource exploitation along the gravel mountain roads. We came upon the expansion area of the proposed Vista 2 mine and underground mine expansion, which appeared to be poised for the Government of Canada’s decision to designate the mine expansion for an Environmental Impact Assessment or green light the project.



However, the Government of Canada issued a Policy Statement on June 11, 2021, noting that the burning of thermal coal “is the single largest contributor to climate change” and a significant source of

toxic pollution.² The Policy Statement stated that, in accordance with Canada's domestic and international commitments to climate change, the Government of Canada considers that any new thermal coal mines or expansions are likely to cause unacceptable environmental effects. In accordance with its Paris Accord Commitments, Canada will be phasing out all thermal coal by 2030.



Either way, the landscape of the rocky mountains is forever affected and changed by the thermal coal mine. As noted by Mountain Cree Camp residents, the game animals have left the area, making it harder to hunt and live a traditional way of life. If the expansion is to go forward, Vista will be the largest thermal coal mine in North America which could produce 22 to 33 million tonnes of carbon dioxide per year. Fish species, Bull trout and Rainbow trout, considered endangered species at risk, are also to be disturbed through the effects of this mining project.

This mine expansion will be detrimental to the health, well-being and traditional ways of the community of Mountain Cree Camp and their ability to exercise their aboriginal and treaty rights. The expansions will cause direct and cumulative effects on the area, including but not limited to fish and loss of fish habitat, animal and animal habitat, water contamination including selenium and other detrimental metals and toxins, loss of access to traditional territories, and the threshold of production for the expansion will be five times greater than the amount that would initially trigger an Environmental Impact Assessment by the Canadian Energy Regulator.

² Environment and Climate Change Canada, “Statement by the Government of Canada on thermal coal mining” (June 11, 2021); Marier Affidavit, Exhibit R [AR Vol 1, Tab 3, p. 1218-1221].