



# **Aboriginal Women and the Environment**

**Air, Noise and Light Pollution**

**An Issue Paper**

**Prepared for the  
National Aboriginal Women's Summit  
June 20-22, 2007  
in Corner Brook, NL**

## **Introduction**

Although air, noise and light pollution may be considered to be a minor nuisance to some Aboriginal individuals, there are circumstances that clearly indicate that these three different pollutants are having negative effects on Aboriginal women, their families and their environment as a whole.

We have been taught to have respect for the role of women as they are the caregivers and protectors of the earth and its elements such as water. When the elements we rely on to survive becomes contaminated or spoiled in some way, we lose our usage of those resources and with that our rights as they are also linked to our traditional resources.

There are more people being born into this world everyday and with that also comes an ever increasing demand for services putting greater strain on the environment in which we retrieve our resources. Having clear air, water and soil readily available in our surrounding environment is vital to having a healthy life, but unfortunately for some, they do not enjoy the same abundance of clean resources as those in other regions may.

Cases on the three different pollutants to be focussed on in this discussion paper will include:

- ❖ Air pollution experienced by residents of the Aamjiwnaang First Nation, Ontario;
- ❖ Light pollution of our night time skies; and
- ❖ Noise pollution experienced by the Innu peoples of Labrador.

## **Air Pollution**

The air that we breathe is integral to life itself and as the air becomes polluted, so do we.

Unfortunately, the same pollution found in the air can also be found in the soil and in our water systems. This is cause for worry amongst the caregivers of our communities as some First Nations are experiencing astronomically high pollution levels.

In June of 2006, Environmental Defence released a report entitled "*Polluted Children, Toxic Nation: A Report on Pollution in Canadian Families*", which provided the test results done on the children and parents from five Canadian families from areas throughout Canada. The studies looked for 68 different chemicals, such as pesticides, PCBs, stain repellents, flame retardants, mercury

and lead. The report discovered that many of the chemicals discovered in the families are associated with cancer, hormone disruption, reproductive disorders, damage to the nervous system, respiratory illnesses and harming development of children. Three generations of the Plain family from the Aamjiwnaang First Nation community were among those studied.

Noted in the report is that fact that “two girls are born for every one boy whereas the normal rate used to be that 105 males were born for every 100 females (about 51.2 percent males). This pattern held true for Aamjiwnaang babies prior to the 1990s, but then something changed. Since 1993, girl births have been steadily outnumbering boy births and the gap continues to widen.” (Drukier et al 2006)

The Toxic Nation study concludes that “although there are several potential factors that could be contributing to the observed decrease in sex ratio of the Aamjiwnaang First Nation, the close proximity of this community to a large aggregation of industries and potential exposures to compounds that may influence sex ratios warrants further assessment into the types of chemical exposures for this population.” (Drukier et al 2006). According to Poirier (2007), abnormally high rates of miscarriages, infertility, still births, birth defects and childhood learning disabilities were also detected.

Since the studies were released, Aamjiwnaang band councillors have increased their lobbying efforts to develop more stringent air monitoring of local industry in Sarnia. “As a result, trained volunteers will soon begin conducting their own community air monitoring, measuring contaminants by tapping into the expertise of an international pollution team known as the Global Community Monitor.” (Poirier 2007)

According to the Environmental Defence website, the opportunity exists now to bring the regulation of toxic chemicals in Canada up to international standards. In Canada, the *Canadian Environmental Protection Act* (CEPA) regulates toxic chemicals used and produced by industry. Under CEPA, safety testing is not required for most chemicals. Industry is not held accountable for its chemicals. Pollution prevention and the phase-out of toxics are being discussed. The result is that as each year passes, increasing volumes of chemicals are entering the environment and making their way into Canadians’ bodies. (Environmental Defence 2007)

## **Noise Pollution**

Noise pollution is the displeasing sounds made by a busy industry, heavy machinery, transportation systems, motor vehicles, aircraft and rail noises. It can cause mild to extreme negative effects to those in its surrounding environment such as headaches, migraines, nervousness, high blood pressure, chronic stress, heart attacks, and can also lead to hearing loss. (Wikipedia 2007).

Although we naturally block out some sounds during the day and night time, sounds are always around us whether they are natural or human made. (Wikipedia 2007)

The Innu peoples of Labrador know noise pollution all too well as their traditional territory has been used by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) through a nearby air base in Goose Bay, Labrador, to conduct low-level flight training, air-defense exercises and bombing practices. These test flights are conducted at low levels ranging from 100 to 1,000 feet above any object in this Labrador territory. These operations are considered a threat to the Innu people's traditional way of life and they have not been silent on this or other issues that plague the Innu. Even with the publication of a book in 2001 entitled '*Canada's Tibet – the Killing of the Innu*', their social issues have yet to be resolved by the government.

To the dismay of the Innu, Canada renewed its agreement with NATO in 1996 to continue the low-level flights for another ten years. These flights and bombings continue in contravention of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which guarantees the right of Aboriginal peoples to peace, security and the control of their own lands. (Gibbings 2007)

The Inuk's traditional territory is home to large animals such as bears, caribou and moose. The effects that noise pollution can have on wildlife can range from mild to extensive. The effects of unnatural noises at different levels can negatively alter the routines of wildlife species activities such as foraging, migrating, or seeking out a mate. Another significant side effect is decreasing home range or loss of habitat whereas their natural environment is becoming increasingly encroached upon by humans and their noises. This decreases usable and sometimes preferable habitat which can lead an already endangered species into its extinction. (Wikipedia 2007)

## **Light Pollution**

For some Aboriginal peoples living in the North and more rural areas throughout Canada, the concept of light pollution may not yet be an issue, but for those living in the urban areas it has become an increasingly controversial issue as city dwellers can no longer see the night time sky due to there being too many bright lights left on in cities.

Light pollution is mainly an issue that occurs during the night when outside porch lights, interior office lights and street lights are left on. According to Appleton (2005), additional sources of light pollution are from poorly engineered light fixtures where the light escapes to the sky and not to the ground. For those that like to enjoy the natural night time beauty that dusk until dawn has to offer, the concept of light pollution would then pose a problem – one that simple actions can resolve.

“Everybody should have the right to see the stars - they are an important part of our environment and culture.” (Appleton 2005) Stars such as the famous ‘North Star’ are essential to guiding those that travel by foot at night as this bright star provides a clear direction to the North, just like a compass would.

The cloak of darkness provides a pristine environmental setting that is preferred by certain wildlife species such as flying squirrels, bats and racoons. These nocturnal species wait until darkness before wandering out in search of food, water and mates. Without natural darkness, these species would suffer. Although there is no legislation currently in place to control the effects of light pollution, there are several conservation programs in place that the federal and provincial/territorial governments provide support for, with more energy saving incentives being introduced every year.

### **Indigenous knowledge and partnerships**

Recommendations for controlling air, noise and light pollution according to Wikipedia (2007) is by utilizing new technology that assists in alleviating any effects. Article 18.4 of the United Nations *Convention on Biological Diversity* 1993 encourages the use of indigenous technological developments, it states: “Parties must encourage and develop methods of cooperation for the development and use of technologies, including Indigenous and traditional technologies”.

Our traditional teachings have taught us that we need to preserve our precious resources for future generations. Aboriginal women possess relevant knowledge that would contribute to regional, national and global efforts to reduce the impacts of human activities on the earth.

In keeping with the responsibility of Aboriginal women to the environment the following recommendations should be incorporated into government policy and program development:

### **Recommendations**

1. The Native Women’s Association of Canada and our Provincial Territorial Member Associations recommend that more research and measurable results of the impacts of pollution on women’s health, especially in areas of reproductive health of Aboriginal women, hormone disruption, skewed birth rates and impacts on the respiratory developmental of children.
2. Although, the need for research on women’s health and impacts of pollution on Aboriginal women needs to be undertaken, it is essential that Aboriginal women are full and effective partners with any undertakings regarding the health and wellness of Aboriginal women and children.

3. Governments must engage Aboriginal women in their efforts to reduce air, light and other pollutions.

## References

Appelton, J. September 23, 2005. *Light Pollution*. Obtained from the website: [http://www.ast.cam.ac.uk/~ipswich/CfDS/Light\\_Pollution.htm](http://www.ast.cam.ac.uk/~ipswich/CfDS/Light_Pollution.htm) on June 5, 2007.

Drukier, Cindy and Xu, Rory. June 9, 2006. *Abnormal Birth Rates in Canadian Native Reserve - Native reserve believes chemical pollution behind abnormal birth rate*. Epoch Times, Toronto. Obtained from the website: <http://en.epochtimes.com/news/6-6-9/42493.html> on June 5, 2007.

Environmental Defence. June 7, 2006. *What can the Canadian government do to better protect us from toxic chemicals?* Obtained from the website: <http://www.environmentaldefence.ca/toxicnation/whatGovDo/whatGovDo.htm> on June 5, 2007.

Gibbins, S. 2007. *Fact sheet - women peace and security*. Obtained from the website: [http://www.criaw-icref.ca/factSheets/Women,%20peace%20and%20security/Women,%20peace%20and%20security\\_e.htm](http://www.criaw-icref.ca/factSheets/Women,%20peace%20and%20security/Women,%20peace%20and%20security_e.htm) on June 8, 2007.

Poirier, J. May 10, 2007. *Band to monitor industry*. Sarnia Observer. Obtained from the website: <http://www.gcmonitor.org/article.php?id=582> on June 5, 2007.

Noise Pollution Clearinghouse. June 8, 2007. *Fact Sheet – Noise Effects on Wildlife*. Obtained from the website: <http://www.nonoise.org/library/fctsheets/wildlife.htm> on June 8, 2007.

Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia. June 7, 2007. *Noise Pollution*. Obtained from the website: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noise\\_pollution](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noise_pollution) on June 7, 2007.