

# **Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation**

## **Traditional Land Use and Occupancy**

### **2011**

#### **Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation**

The Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation (WSFN) communities are located in the Swan Valley in West-Central Manitoba. Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation is a small Nation with a large diverse Traditional Territory. Most Traditional Territory that the Nation used in the past has since been developed, so that the First Nation's people have had fewer and fewer areas in which to practise our traditional way of life. Many important areas of hunting and gathering have been lost due to this development of the land. Many of these areas are now farmland or parkland, or land controlled by Rural Municipalities. As more and more of our Traditional Territory is swallowed up by development, the undeveloped land becomes increasingly important to our people as these areas are where we can still pass on traditional knowledge to our youth. "The more land a Nation loses, the more lost a Nation becomes" was a quote by one of our elders.

#### **Traditional Territory**

The Traditional Territory of the Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation has always had many uses for its people and neighbouring communities. This area ranges from the muskeg and bog areas in the North near the Overflowing River, all the way to the sandy hills of the Kettles and Southward to Cowan. Some of our First Nation members have even ventured as far South as the Valley River for the purpose of fishing. In between the North and South edges of our Traditional Territory is the valley system of rivers that were and are widely used. Along the South is the Duck Mountains, a prime hunting region until the Moose collapse of recent years. To the West are the Porcupine Hills, a rich forested area known for good hunting and its pristine lakes. To the East lays the Swan Lake and its many islands. Further East is the region of the Swan Pelican Provincial Forest. Within the Valley system, there is an abundance of grazing lands that make this an area of good grazing for big game animals. The area that makes up the Traditional Territory for the Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation is unique in that it comprises such a diverse environment. The impacts on the Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation's Traditional Territory from the impending Bipole III transmission line would be great and would affect all members of the Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation in many ways.

#### **Objective**

The objective of the study was to map out and document by way of interview, all traditional knowledge of current and past use and occupancy, to identify any areas of concern or negative impacts to Traditional and Aboriginal Rights, to identify any areas of concern or negative impacts to the Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation's Traditional Territory and to the environment, and to identify the impacts that the proposed Bipole III transmission line would have to the people of the Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation, and to the Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation communities and band members located throughout our Traditional Territory.

## **Mapping**

Mapping was done on a custom map provided by Louisiana Pacific Canada Ltd. The map covered only some of the Traditional Territory where the Bipole III transmission line would run. The WSNF focused on this area as it would be the area most impacted by the proposed transmission line. The area mapped encompasses only about 60% of the Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation's Traditional Territory. Thirty individual maps were compiled into one overall composite map. The 30 people interviewed make up 10% of the adult population of the WSNF. These individuals were chosen on the basis of interest in the project as well as traditional land use. There are still many WSNF members who would like to participate in a study such as this, but due to budget and time constraints, this was not possible. We hope to further document additional traditional knowledge in the future so that our Nation's knowledge is not lost.

If more studies were done, our Nation would be better able to provide a full description of how our Traditional Territory is utilized.

The maps were divided into four categories to make it easier to identify certain types of traditional knowledge. These categories are as follows.

1. Composite Map – This map holds all gathered data from the 2011 WSNF Traditional Land Use and Occupancy (TLUO) study. As can be seen, there is heavy use of traditional lands near where the transmission line would run. It is important to note that this map represents only 10% of the knowledge of our community members.
2. Cultural Activities Map – This map shows areas where cultural activities have taken place and other areas of occupancy such as camp sites related to hunting and gathering, and sacred sites. Many of the interviewees could have shared more knowledge if given more time to do so. Due to the tight time frame for the study, that was not possible.
3. Harvesting Map – This map shows areas of hunting, trapping, and fishing. As the map demonstrates, the WSNF uses a vast area for these activities. Animals use a vast range to live, so too must people of the Nation, in order to maintain our cultural lifestyle and traditional knowledge.
4. Gathering Map – This map shows areas in which gathering of food and herbs is still vitally important to our Nation. We have lost a lot of these types of areas to farm development over the last 70 years, more so as big machinery replaced farm hands. Due to this our Nation has become very protective of the remaining areas left to gather essential items such as berries and roots, or medicinal herbs such as sweet grass and sage. Many former medicinal areas such as sweet grass areas are now farm fields.

## **Work**

Four people were hired to complete the WSNF TLUO study. The four people were hired to the positions of Coordinator, Interviewer, Mapper, and Transcriber. An Interpreter was called in when one was needed. Two weeks of training was provided which, after speaking with our consultant, was deemed "pretty tight", in terms of time spent on training to accomplish a task such as this. Given this concern the overall project was still completed in good time.

During the course of the project there were some delays, one being the spring flood of 2011 which closed our community down for a number of days. Thirty people were chosen from the Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation to be interviewed for the 2011 WSN TLUO study.

The work involved:

1. Picking up the interviewees. This usually meant picking them up at home.
2. Driving the interviewees to the interview site at the Community Band Office.
3. Going out to sites selected by the interviewees so we could see some of these sensitive sites, the understanding being that we were there to learn traditional knowledge from knowledge keepers. This method also ensured accuracy of information for areas of concern.
4. Going back to the interview location to begin the interview process.
5. Interviewing – All interviews were audio recorded, but participants declined to share the audio portion of their interviews. They felt that sharing the knowledge was enough.
6. Documenting – All shared knowledge was documented on paper and digitally.
7. Mapping – Done with interviewees to ensure accuracy of data collected.
8. Transcribing from written to type – Due to funding spending rules, we could not purchase all the equipment needed such as a computer for typing, so all interviews were hand written before being typed.
9. Driving interviewees home when the interviews were completed.

#### **Areas of Particular Concern**

1. There are many areas of concern along the proposed Bipole III route. For instance, the Harvesting Map shows that a high concentration of hunting takes place in this area. Note that the transmission line would go through prime big game areas. This is worrisome to a lot of people for the effect it will have in taking away the shelter provided for these game animals. Easier access to these animals because of the corridor that will be created will make poaching more of a problem than it currently is. With the Moose populations within our Traditional Territory declining at an alarming rate, this opening of the land will only make it harder to recover this important animal resource.
2. Another important area is the Kettle Hills which has provided sustenance and an area for generating revenue for our Nation members. The proposed transmission line will cut a large swath of land through the South regions of the Kettle Hills area. This area is prime Blueberry country. The spraying that comes with these lines is very worrisome in this respect. "Will it kill our Blueberry country?" was a question that was asked by one of the elders. Many of the members of Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation migrate to this region during the spring and summer for harvesting and gathering of the many types of resources available to the Nation and its people. Many other First Nation people come here from other Nations to partake of the bountiful harvest of this region. The Kettle Hills has always been important for the diversity of animal and

plant resources. Hunting and trapping have always played a key role for the people living in or near the Kettle Hills. The gathering of the many types of berries found here has also drawn many other First Nations and Non-First Nations people to this area. It is one of the few places not touched by development and the people of Wuskwi Sipiik would like to keep this area as natural as possible to maintain this area for future generations. This area has also been a cultural gathering place among the Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation and other First Nations like Sapotaweyak Cree Nation, Mosakahiken Cree Nation and Pine Creek First Nation, to name a few.

3. Another area of great importance is the area locally known as Moose Meadows. This is a breeding and wintering ground for Moose and with the Moose in decline we do not want this area disturbed. If the line comes through this area, it will be destroying a very important source of Moose habitat which in turn will affect the Moose population's ability to recover.
4. The wet grassland, found just North of the main community of the Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation along the Wuskwi Sipiik (Indian Birch River), is also an area of particular concern as this is an area where sweet grass grows in abundance. Local farmers do not harvest this location out of respect for our Nation's use of this medicinal herb. The worry is that increased traffic in this area will affect the plant's ability to grow. Increased dust from work crews and areas where work camps will go is also a concern as increased traffic inhibits this plant's ability to grow.
5. The area just West of the main community of Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation is also prime habitat for Moose and Deer. With the Moose populations in decline, this is problematic to the people of Wuskwi Sipiik. The corridor will make it more accessible to hunters of the Moose, Elk and Deer populations which, due to farmland development, have already lost a lot of the natural cover that a forest provides. In this area are salt licks that are an important mineral source for game animals, and which we do not want disturbed. With more time to do this study, a more comprehensive and detailed report would have been forthcoming, but due to time and budget constraints, this was not possible. The need by Manitoba Hydro to rush this project was felt at the community level. The people interviewed would have liked a couple of days to properly document all traditional knowledge available, and they felt that the project was rushed and not enough time was given to do the work more thoroughly. Most community members would like to see another study completed with more of the community members involved. Most members of Wuskwi Sipiik were concerned that acquiring only 10% of the available traditional knowledge was not enough to properly document all concerns from the people of the Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation.
6. The area surrounding the Red Deer River is also of particular concern as this is also another location of prime Moose habitat. With Moose hunting still open in this area, the increased accessibility as well as the increased visibility will make it easier to spot and kill Moose. With the Moose populations in decline, this has become a major worry to the community of Wuskwi Sipiik. Also located in this area are medicinal herbs such as sweet grass and cedar which will be put at risk as the land is cleared and work crews trample the ground. Berries such as Bottle berries, which are getting harder to find, will also be put at risk. The Bottle berry has been slowly disappearing as development of the North end of the Swan Valley has progressed. This berry is located in only a couple of small areas and the people of Wuskwi Sipiik would like to protect those areas as best they can. With a more comprehensive study we would be better able to document these areas. The project did not allow for much time to be spent in the field as we were on a tight time schedule.

7. Other issues and concerns that were brought up had to do with rivers and streams. With the degradation of the quality of water and the increased amount of silt and contaminants coming into the river and stream systems, the transmission line and the clearing that would take place has become an issue of great importance as it would affect the Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation's drinking water. The Bipole III transmission line would cross over a fair number of streams and rivers within the Traditional Territory of the Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation, and the area where the transmission line would run would be clear cut to make room for the transmission line. This will cover a large area comprising the North and South reaches and all areas in between of the Traditional Territory of the Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation.
8. The disruption of the migration route of Geese is also another concern raised by the community members of Wuskwi Sipiik. When the Geese fly North in the spring and South in the fall, they use the Porcupine Hills as a landmark. They fly in off the hills located along the Western boundaries of our Traditional Territory, going East, down into the wetland areas and farm fields. With the building of the Bipole III transmission line, the line might cause a migratory shift and cause the Geese to find another route to its feeding and nesting grounds. The Goose is an important food source during spring and fall, and the loss of this animal or even a decrease in the amount of Geese landing will have a profound effect on the people of Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation. Many people still hunt Geese for sustenance. Past experience shows us that if you change the land too much, the natural habitat for animals gets lost and population levels are depleted. For example, since the intensive development of farmland and all the clearing associated with this, the coot or mud hen populations have been almost wiped out. Prior to Louisiana Pacific Canada Ltd. opening up its OSB plant, there were literally thousands upon thousands of coots found in the marshlands surrounding the Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation. In the past few years there has been only a handful spotted in the local area. The degradation of water quality, due to timber harvesting and the clearing of land by farmers, is one of the reasons this has happened. Fish numbers have been declining at an alarming rate over the past ten years to the point of causing considerable worry.
9. The area located around Bellsite is also an area of particular concern. There are many types of berries found in this area such as Blueberries, Cranberries, Saskatoons, Mossberries, Choke cherries, Raspberries, Strawberries, Bottle berries, Goose berries, and Pin cherries. This is an important area because of the diverse types of berries found within this area. With the increased traffic near this area due to clearing the corridor or the building of temporary work camps, the loss of any one of these important food sources is worrisome and would be detrimental to the people of the Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation. Also located in this area are a number of Medicinal Herbs that the people of Wuskwi Sipiik still use to this day. Some examples include Seneca Root, Sage and Cranberry Bark, and there are many other Medicinal Herbs found in the area. These types of plants grow here because of the soil type and the habitat that is found only in certain areas within the Swan Valley and surrounding area.
10. Another issue raised was the impact of the Bipole III transmission line on the natural beauty of the Swan Valley area and surrounding hills. This natural beauty helps to bring in tourists to the Swan Valley area which in turn helps to generate revenue within the Swan Valley area. The loss of this natural beauty will affect the Valley by turning people away from the area. This not only affects the Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation, but affects all communities within the Swan Valley.

The Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation is concerned over these issues because, historically, Government and Big Business have not acted in the best interest of the people whose lives will be dramatically affected by resource developments. There is the issue of trust. The past has shown the Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation that Government

looks out for its own interests first and foremost, and Manitoba Hydro can be expected to do the same. With this being said, the people of Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation sincerely hope that the Manitoba Government and Manitoba Hydro do not intend to push this line through the Traditional Territory of the Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation without coming to some sort of an agreement on settling a claim for loss of use and destruction of critical habitats that the Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation claims as Traditional Territory.

## **Limitations**

During the course of the 2011 WSNF Traditional Land Use and Occupancy study we encountered many obstacles. Due to the tight time frame, many people felt that the study could have been more in depth. Many of the interviewees felt that more time out on the land would have been beneficial to documenting a lot of the high priority areas where the Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation's people have concerns. There are many areas where data collection on traditional use has been missed because the study only involved a small percentage of the community. Only ten percent of the adult population of the Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation was interviewed for this traditional knowledge study. To have a more accurate understanding of how the land was and is used, more than 10% of the people would need to be interviewed for their knowledge. A more on the ground approach would need to be implemented, which means getting out on the land, taking G.P.S. coordinates, and the sharing and documentation of knowledge.

The limitations also include not having enough time to properly develop a more in depth proposal so that most of the limitations could have been avoided (time frame for proposal development was about one week). The time frame for submitting the proposal was short and the community felt rushed into submitting the proposal (before time ran out). Reasons for not spending more time on the land documenting areas of concern were shortfall of project development and unforeseen costs, such as costs involved with mileage and time spent visiting critical sites. Most of the site visits that were done were in close proximity to the Nation's main community so that there was enough time to go back to the interview site and complete the documentation and mapping of the traditional knowledge.

The Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation is spread out over a vast area and to properly document all the traditional knowledge and all concerns would take longer than a couple of months. The people of Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation have strongly advocated for more traditional knowledge studies to be completed before development further impacts the Nation's Traditional Territory.

When the Nation's consultant was asked how long a traditional knowledge study was supposed to take to complete, the consultant informed the community that in order to properly do a study of this importance, it would usually take about two years from time of proposal development to study completion. The Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation had about six months to complete the project from development to study completion as it pertains to the mapping of the traditional knowledge acquired, including providing training for the group selected to perform the interviews. With the limited training provided, the Nation would like to commend the group for doing an excellent job!

Most of the written and audio information has been maintained in the community due to the choice of interviewees to not release this sensitive and personal documentation. The Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation maintains the right to all sensitive documentation. The maps and this written report have been provided to Manitoba Hydro.

## **Recommendations**

The people of Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation did not have enough information from Manitoba Hydro at the time of the Traditional Knowledge and Land Use study to properly ascertain the extent of the damage to the Nation's Traditional Territory. More time was and is still needed to determine the full extent of the impacts to the environment and to the Nation's Traditional and Aboriginal Rights as well as Treaty Rights. The Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation would like to engage in discussions with Manitoba Hydro on how the Nation wishes to proceed with the Bipole III Transmission Project that would come through the Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation's Traditional Territory. The proposed Bipole III transmission line would come close to the Nation's land, and in some cases, would be right across the road. The proposed Bipole III transmission line would be located approximately halfway between the two main communities of the Wuskwi Sipiik First Nation (approximately five miles from the main community down by the lake and also the same distance from the highway community located along the # 10 highway).