

Asubpeeschoseewagong (Grassy Narrows, Ontario): On the Blockade

By Will Braun

“Canadian Yearly Meeting formally undertook Aboriginal concerns with the beginnings of the Quaker Committee on Native Concerns. This arose out of Friends’ concerns around Grassy Narrows and mercury pollution in 1974. Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) is maintaining a presence there now and the following is a report from a recent CPT volunteer. CPT is looking for more volunteers to maintain a witnessing presence in Grassy Narrows. Friends may want to consider if they can respond to this request.”

It was past midnight as we stood around the bonfire beside a logging road in Northwestern Ontario. I’d never been to a blockade before. It was a one-night “roving blockade,” part of a high stakes game of cat-and-mouse between the Anishinaabe people of Asubpeeschoseewagong (Grassy Narrows, Ontario) and Montreal-based logging giant, Abitibi Consolidated.

As we stood in the night forest, one could imagine sections of the daily paper scattered on a coffee table somewhere in suburbia, the product of trees taken earlier from clearcuts near the blockade, and in New York or Montreal, an investor checking the price of his Abitibi shares, oblivious to the fire burning beside that remote road and in the hearts of the people there.

Joe Fobister was one of those around the fire. “I can’t describe the feeling,” he said, “It’s like my heart being pulled out of my chest every time I drive into a clearcut.” The next day, I joined Fobister as he drove past the main blockade to a large clearcut in an area where his parents took him for months at a time when he was young. “I can’t even imagine anymore what it

used to be like,” he said. He surveyed the scene silently as his grandson, Jeremy, climbed a pile of freshly cut logs. “When they look at the forest,” he said of Abitibi, “all they see is money.” In 2002, Abitibi revenues topped \$5.1 billion.

A menacing machine, with claws, blades and an evident appetite for trees sat on the naked hillside that was once home to birds, animals and a proud family. Empty oil pails littered the site.

Provincial spokesperson Shawn Stevenson says there is extensive “consultation” with Grassy Narrows on forestry planning, but when pushed on how much say Aboriginal people actually have, he says “[Aboriginal] input on site-specific issues,” is “considered” in forest planning.

After the U.S. reader puts her newspaper in the recycling, and the Canadian investor cashes in his dividends, Fobister is left standing on a bald hillside.

The people of Grassy Narrows, who have been on the road since December 3, 2002, say they will stay as long as it takes. The ultimate goal of the blockaders is Asubpeeschoseewagong jurisdiction over their customary lands.

And only time will tell how this David and Goliath tale will unfold, and whether Joe’s grandson will be taking his own grandchildren for a stroll through a clearcut or an old-growth forest.



Photo of ‘Grassy Narrows Kids’ by Will Braun

Will Braun is a member of Christian Peacemaker Teams, which is an initiative among Mennonite and Church of the Brethren congregations and Friends Meetings that supports violence reduction efforts around the world. You may contact Doug Pritchard, Canada Coordinator of Christian Peacemaker Teams Tel (416) 423-5525 Fax (416) 423-9213