



Protecting the Nastapoka River – A Multicultural Approach to Sustainability

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This presentation aims to describe and analyze a case study concerning the creation of a 27,000 km² national park near the village of Umiujaq, Nunavik (Northern Québec). The aim of the park is to protect the Nastapoka River and the majority of its watershed from mining and hydroelectric development projects. With a 30 m high waterfall near its mouth, the Nastapoka River is of great importance to the region as it is part of the ancestral Inuit land as well as a habitat for the world's only population of freshwater seals. It is located on Inuit and Cree territory, whose people hunt and fish in the area. The river was first targeted by Hydro-Québec (a provincial hydroelectricity company) for a mega-complex project called Grande-Baleine, but that was set aside by the government of Québec in 1994.

In 2008, an important development project named Plan Nord was announced by the government of Québec. Plan Nord was implemented in 2011 to provide access to natural resources in Northern Québec. It aims to protect 50% of northern natural land – an objective that was largely denounced as a form of “compensation” so that Plan Nord could be held up as an “exemplary project of sustainable development”. National park projects were already underway in Nunavik. For example, Tursujuq National Park caused disagreements between the local population and planners. They debated whether the Nastapoka watershed should be included within its limits despite its reservations by Hydro-Québec. Public hearings were held in 2008-2009 and the watershed was finally protected in 2013 – thereby integrating Plan Nord's objectives in terms of conservation. Even though the addition of this land to the preserved area is now considered by many to be a victory, the idea of a park was not always popular among the Inuit of Umiujaq. They feared losing access to their hunting and fishing grounds and they also foresaw an unmanageable flow of tourists.

By studying reports, memoirs, public hearings and media coverage relating to the events in this case study, we aim to elucidate the symbolic meaning of the territory and how it can affect regional planning and development, especially in a multicultural context such as Nunavik. Our data will be presented in relation to the following questions: What different representations can be identified through discourse analysis? How was the idea of “sustainable development” conceptualized and used in debates? Could any of the other proposed projects have been interpreted as sustainable? Are national parks the best planning option in the context of regional development on Inuit land? And, finally, what impact does Tursujuq National Park have on the everyday life of Umiujaq's residents?