



MOOSE CREE FIRST NATION

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An Open Letter to Grand Chief Matthew Coon Come,

You recently started a lawsuit on behalf of the Cree people in Quebec asserting "Aboriginal title" and "Aboriginal rights" over much of the Moose Cree Homeland in Ontario. Your lawsuit causes me—and all Moose Cree people—grave concern. I ask you to reconsider this misguided claim and do the right thing. I ask you to withdraw it.

This is Not Your Territory, We Have Controlled, Protected and Nurtured These Lands and Waters

Since time immemorial, the Moose Cree people have exercised our sovereignty over these lands and waters to which you now lay "claim." These lands and waters are the Moose Cree Homeland. It is our history, language and stories that span every inch of these lands and waters—not yours. Your stories are in your own territory to the east in what is now Quebec, which you control, protect and nurture.

Your relationship to the Moose Cree Homeland is through being our Cree relations to the east. We must respect our true history as Cree and our traditional laws, not attempt to have non-Indigenous lawyers and courts rewrite our history and our traditions for your sole advantage. These are the same colonial tactics that governments historically used to diminish our sovereignty, treaties and nationhood—by looking at these issues only through their perspective, never considering the people actually living on and in control of the land.

With respect, your modern day claims to our Homeland appear to be driven by politics, opportunism and non-Indigenous law and lawyers. This approach is wrong. It disrespects our ancestors and disrespects the Cree way.

Our Homeland is Our Lifeblood

Our Homeland is our lifeblood, just as your vast territory to the east in Quebec is the lifeblood of the Quebec Cree. We, your neighbours in Ontario, have watched over the past decades as the Quebec Cree have used your land and your modern treaty to generate vast wealth. We have watched your participation in the construction of massive hydroelectric projects and other resource developments. We have celebrated the successes of our neighbours in Quebec while we worked hard here—in our Homeland—to implement the true intent of our treaty, Treaty 9, to build a prosperous future for ourselves and our future generations.

We do not have your vast territory, stretching all the way from the Ontario-Quebec border to Labrador. We do not have your enormous wealth. We do not rely on lawyers to litigate lawsuit after lawsuit against Canada and Quebec, reaping hundreds of millions of dollars in settlements in the process. But we are strong. We protect our Homeland. And from this hard work we are building a prosperous Moose Cree Nation. We are respected as a partner and decision-maker in our Homeland.

We are engaging with resource developers—mining companies, forestry companies, hydro-electric developers—as well as the Federal and Ontario governments. We are doing this based on our inherent jurisdiction, self-determination and our Treaty. And we are reaching agreements and building partnerships based on this reality, creating jobs and prosperity for our people while protecting our lands and waters for our children and our children's children. We are—through our own effort, our own work, and the strength of our people and our culture—succeeding in building a brighter future for our Nation.

But now you tell us that our Homeland, with its resources, its lands, its waters, its cultural sites and burial grounds, is not really ours, but yours, and we only get a “share.” You say that we are not the ones who will decide how our lands will be used, how our future will be built. You say that our ability to self-determine, to exercise our inherent jurisdiction, to flourish, today and in the future, is now subject to your claims. This we cannot accept.

You Seek to “Share” in Our Homeland, Yet You Have No History of Sharing

You say that your only interest is to “share” the lands and resources in Moose Cree's Homeland. You say that Moose Cree's objection to your lawsuit makes us bad neighbours. You say that we should cooperate and support you. You say opposing your lawsuit is the wrong thing to do. But the facts tell a different story.

Your people entered into your modern treaty in 1975. You did so with no regard for any Moose Cree interests. There was no consultation with Moose Cree. There was no attempt to recognize any rights of Moose Cree people as users—since time immemorial—of lands in Quebec. There was no suggestion that you wanted to “share” anything with us. But we understood that your history and territory was in Quebec, and ours was here in Ontario, and we supported your efforts and applauded your successes.

When you negotiated and entered into your treaty you looked after only your own interests. You had no hesitation in signing and supporting a treaty and associated legislation that purports to extinguish the rights of all other Indigenous peoples who used the land, even those who had no part of the treaty—the Algonquin, the Innu, the Moose Cree and others. And you defend this extinguishment to this day, over the continuing objections of your Indigenous neighbours. But unlike many other groups, we have never challenged your treaty in court. We have never demanded a say over how lands in Quebec are used.

You have made billions from hydro-electric developments, from government funding, from economic development activities and from endless lawsuits. Yet there has never been the slightest suggestion you would “share” this wealth with anyone else, certainly not with the Moose Cree. And we have never asked for any of it.

You Refuse to Share Even With the Your Own People—the MoCreebec

You claim that part of this lawsuit is aimed at getting recognition and rights in Ontario for the MoCreebec. The MoCreebec are Quebec Cree people who moved to Ontario—to the Moose Cree Homeland—over the past decades. They live on or near Moose Factory Island. Despite the fact that they are newcomers to our Homeland, the Moose Cree have made space for these Quebec Cree families. Moose Cree First Nation regularly gives them permission to harvest in our Homeland. We have tried to be good hosts and have tried to be welcoming to these recent arrivals from Quebec.

Yet you have always, and to this day, refused to share with the MoCreebec—your own people. The MoCreebec, a part of the Quebec Cree people, get essentially nothing from their own Quebec Cree government. The neglect of the MoCreebec by you and the Quebec Cree government is so profound that they were forced to bring a lawsuit to try to force you to share with them. Your own people had to sue you to try to get the benefits and support they are owed, that they deserve, under their modern treaty. And you resisted their claims.

Eventually, you settled that lawsuit. But you did not settle on the basis of a commitment to share what you have—that you refused to do. Rather, you settled on the basis of a commitment that you would use your financial and political might to try to force government to grant land and rights to the MoCreebec in Ontario, in our Homeland. You, who now declares a commitment to “sharing,” would not even share with your own people who live in Ontario. When asked to share, your solution was to retain legal counsel and demand rights and land in our Homeland. These actions may have no consequence to you but they have profound consequence for Moose Cree. You are prepared to “share” nothing, but instead attempt to take from your neighbours. This is shameful.

You Want Harvesting in Ontario, Yet Deny Us Harvesting in Quebec

You complain in your lawsuit that Quebec Cree people have difficulty harvesting here in Ontario. That simply is not true. There exists a long-standing policy of leniency by Ontario toward Quebec harvesters. Moose Cree First Nation regularly gives permission to MoCreebec people to harvest in our Homeland.

It is the Moose Cree people who seek to harvest on their traditional lands in Quebec that are excluded and made to suffer. It is the Moose Cree who have been displaced from their harvesting grounds in Quebec. When Moose Cree people attempt to harvest in Quebec they are harassed and forced to leave, often by the Quebec Cree—by the very people who now bring this lawsuit and claim a desire to share. It is common for Moose Cree people harvesting in Quebec to be confronted by Quebec Cree hunters and told to go “back to Ontario.” It seems that sharing, in your view, is strictly a one-way street.

Conclusion

You and your people signed a treaty in Quebec and purported to extinguish the rights of all your neighbours. You got rich, and never once shared a penny of your wealth. You have denied the requests for support from your own people—MoCreebec—for decades. And now, when you have started a lawsuit claiming rights and title to the Moose Cree Homeland, you accuse Moose Cree of being unwilling to share. I do not know what “share” means to you or the Quebec Cree. But in the Moose Cree Homeland, “share” does not mean “I will keep everything that is mine, and also take much of what is yours.” Yet that is exactly what you are trying to do. This is not acceptable. This is not the Cree way.

On behalf of my Council and on behalf of all Moose Cree people I call on you, again, to do the right thing and withdraw this misguided lawsuit.

Meegwetch,



Chief Norm Hardisty Jr.
Moose Cree First Nation

c.c., Chief Darlene Cheechoo, Crees of the First Nation of Waskaganish
Chief Marcel Happyjack, Cree First Nation of Waswanipi
Chief Thomas Jolly Sr., Cree Nation of Nemaska
Chief Kenneth Cheezo, Cree Nation of Eastmain
Chief Dennis Georgekish, Cree Nation of Wemindji
Chief Richard Shecapio, Cree Nation of Mistissini
Chief Curtis Bosum, Oujé-Bougoumou Cree Nation
Chief Davey Bobbish, Cree Nation of Chisasibi
Chief Louisa Mamianskum Wynne, Whapmagoostui First Nation
Chief Pauline Trapper-Hester, Cree Nation of Washaw Sibi
Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Government of Canada
Premier Kathleen Wynne, Government of Ontario
Minister Carolyn Bennett, Ministry of Indigenous and Northern Affairs
Minister David Zimmer, Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs
National Chief Perry Bellegarde, Assembly of First Nations
Ontario Regional Chief Isadore Day, Chiefs of Ontario
Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler, Nishnawbe Aski Nation
Grand Chief Jonathon Solomon, Mushkegowuk Council
Mr. Allan Jolly, MoCreebec Association