

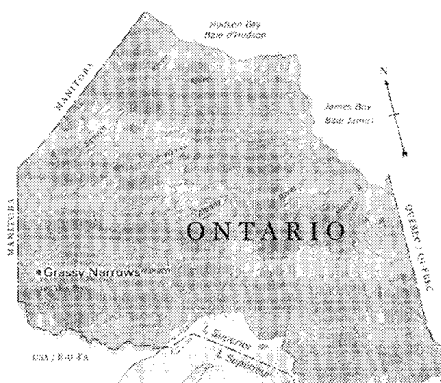
# Grassy Narrows: A Community of Suffering

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## **Introduction**

Grassy Narrows is an Ojibwa Indian reserve consisting of about 780 people (2005). It is located about 1,200 miles northwest of Toronto, Ontario, and 120 miles east of Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. At the beginning of the 1960s, the people of Grassy Narrows were still living according to their traditional ways: mostly from fishing, hunting, trapping, and gathering. One of the reasons was because they were keeping themselves relatively isolated geographically and culturally, and they had little contact with the Canada's mainstream modern society. However, the situation began to change during the 1960s. The Department of Indian Affairs forced the people of Grassy Narrows to move their settlement from their old reserve to a new place about five miles away from the previous one. This relocation broke their tradition and produced a lot of social problems, such as severe alcoholism and violence, in the community. In addition to this, in 1970, the English-Wabigoon river system,

which was one of the most important lifelines for the people of Grassy Narrows, was contaminated by methyl mercury dumped by a paper mill company. Many people of the community got a severe illness, Minamata disease, because of the contamination. Because of those problems and the alcohol-related problems caused by poverty and their feelings of loss, the sense of community was falling apart. Since 1990s, the people of Grassy Narrows have been facing a new problem: an extensive clear cutting of their land by logging companies. However, the people have been fighting against the companies to save their own land and resources. Grassy Narrows is a community which has a long and tragic history of suffering and repeated problems; being forced to move their settlement to another place, having their environment poisoned by methyl mercury and getting ill because of it, and having an experience of serious social problems such as alcoholism, self-destructive behavior, child neglect, and depression. However, the people of the community are still fighting for their land rights from clear-cutting by industrial companies.



**Fig. 1. Grassy Narrows (Source: *The Canadian Encyclopedia*)**

## Relocation

Some historians say that the ancestors of the people in Grassy Narrows were already living in the area of the English river when the first Europeans made a contact with them in the early seventeenth century. The river has always been very important for their life and the people have had much love for and devotion to the river and the land since then. They lived on trapping, harvesting and gathering wild rice and berries, and fishing. In the eighteenth century, Grassy Narrows formed small family groups which consisted of twenty to thirty-five members. The people migrated according to the seasons within their inherited land borders. Each family group was based on a clan, and each clan lived on a trapping ground in winter, and they moved back to their reserve and lived in the community in summer. The small kin groups were more flexible and easier to travel to hunt animals for furs than larger family groups, as they used to be long time before. At that time, fur trading with European companies was a way to acquire goods, such as guns, clothing, and some kinds of food.

In 1873, the North-West Angle Treaty (Treaty No. 3) was signed between Chiefs of the Saulteaux Indians (a tribe of Ojibwa Indians including Grassy Narrows community) and the Queen of Britain and Ireland. In this treaty, the Indian chiefs agreed to give up all of their rights to their land of 55,000 square miles to the government forever. The government agreed to

keep limited sized reserves for the Indians, promote their well-being, and operate the lands for them. The government also agreed to let the Indian people hunt and fish in some areas of the lands that they had given up to the government, to keep providing education to Indian people, and to pay money to each Indian person for "extinguishment of all claims" against the government. They paid twelve dollars to each person with five dollars more each year, with a larger amount to the chiefs. The treaty has been regarded by the people of Grassy Narrows as the basis of the relationships between the government and the Canadian people.

Although the treaty seems rather unfair, the relationships with the government and the fur trading companies were quite good for the Grassy Narrows community at that time. The Hudson's Bay Company, a fur trading company, was one of a few main important connections for Grassy Narrows to the outside world. Working for the Bay provided the only paid job that they could get at that time, and the people of Grassy Narrows could buy the goods and food which were necessary for their lives only through the Bay. For the Hudson's Bay Company, also, the Indian reserve was a good market for their products, allowing them to control the fur trade in the area, because it was isolated geographically.

The government-planned relocation to the new reserve began in 1963, and the last family left the old reserve in 1972. In 1964, Eric Law, who was the supervisor of the Kenora Indian Agency then wrote a letter to W. Benedickson, the Minister of Mines and

Technical Surveys in Ottawa. In that letter, Law says about Grassy Narrows as follows:

About five years ago the Grassy Narrows Band Council requested a Day School be constructed on their Reserve. They also wanted a road into their reserve from the Jones Road so that they could go to Kenora and the new Hudson Bay Store which was planned for construction on the Jones Road...

The Band Council had several meetings with me and they decided where they wanted their road and the new school. Finding it impossible to get a road into the old settlement, and their location of the road and the new school five miles away, the Band decided on a long range plan of developing a new community around the area they set aside for the new school and sports ground.

(quoted in Shkilnyk, 167)

However, an elder who had served as chief of councilor had a different view on the situation: "Where we were moved, nobody asked us anything. They told us what we had to do. First they built five houses, at least two years before anyone moved to the new site. I was still on the old reserve when John Kennedy died, and that was in November 1963. They, the government, just gave the Indians orders. They also told us that if we didn't move to the new reserve, all the people would have their family allowances cut off. That's the way it was" (quoted in Shkilnyk, 168). As he says, the government didn't ask the people anything but made the decision for the relocation independently. Moreover,

Law wrote that it was "impossible to get a road into the old settlement", probably because of geographical and technical reasons. However, the people of Grassy Narrows did not think that that was the real reason for the relocation, because there was already a logging path between the old reserve and the Jones Road. Instead, the people believe that that was for the Hudson's Bay Company's economic benefit which would be gained by the relocation.

The people of Grassy Narrows received some negative consequences because of the relocation, physically and emotionally. First, living far from the English-Wabigoon River, which had a huge meaning in their lives, caused great spiritual damage for the people. They had only one small lake called Garden Lake on the new site, but the lake was not "A Living Thing" for them. Moreover, the people couldn't get enough water for their lives from the lake. On the old reserve, they could get water from the river freely without disturbing anyone else, because each family had its own space. Although establishing a water supply system all over the new reserve was included in the initial plan for the community, over two decades, only a small number of families received the water system, and the other families still needed to go to the lake on their own to get water. On the new reserve, people were forced to live close to each other. Each family could no longer keep exclusive lands as they used to when they were living on the old reserve. The housing construction plan made by Indian Affairs put the people in crowded conditions. Having a personal living space for each family meant a lot to the people

of Grassy Narrows. According to Kai Erikson, a sociologist who visited Grassy Narrows in 1979, "Every people, every culture, has its own sense of how much distance should be maintained between neighbors, how wide a margin of privacy is necessary to protect individuality; and when that sense of spacing is changed by circumstance, the almost ironical result is that neighborliness breaks down. When people are pressed together too closely, they can become more distant emotionally and spiritually: hostilities and aggressions, once insulated by a cushion of space, now fill the narrow gaps like a kind of electricity ... Grassy Narrows has become not only a tight concentration of people but a tight concentration of troubles" (quoted in Shkilnyk, 174). An elder of Grassy Narrows says: "when you have the space, you have a better chance to look after yourself, to be independent. As soon as they started to bunch us up, the problems started, the drinking, the violence. This has a lot to do with being all bunched up" (quoted in Shkilnyk, 173). As he states, after the relocation, problems related to alcohol and violence dramatically increased in the Grassy Narrows community.

### **Mercury Poisoning: Minamata Disease**

Minamata disease is an illness caused by methyl mercury which finds its way into the body, first found in Minamata, Japan, in the late 1950s. Over a thousand people suffered serious symptoms of the disease such as neurological damage, crippled limbs, blindness, paralysis, internal disorders, and loss of bodily

functions by 1970, and 107 people died because of the disease.

The village of Minamata is located on the Minamata Bay of the Shiranui Sea, in the Kyusyu area in Southern Japan. The population of the village is about forty thousand. The people there live mostly on commercial fishing, tourism, and working for the big petrochemical section of the Chisso Corporation. At first, the disease was completely unknown among the people, and even among doctors. A strange fact was that many of the most severely affected patients were the people who ate fish and shellfish regularly. Soon, a research team from Kumamoto University Medical School realized that the disease was caused by a poisonous heavy metal present in the fish and shellfish in Minamata Bay; however, it took years to find out that it was the Chisso Corporation which was discharging the mercury into the bay. The Chisso Corporation kept dumping the poison into the bay until 1968, more than 10 years after since the first human patients were found.

The methyl mercury which people ingest becomes more concentrated and more toxic as it moves through the food chain. First, microorganisms in the grounds under the water absorb the substance from the water, then the substance transfers through planktons, insects, little fish, and bigger fish. And human beings who eat the fish finally get poisoned by the methyl mercury which has, by that time, become more concentrated and dangerous for them. The medical symptoms of Minamata disease are determined as follows: "numbness of the mouth, lips, tongue, hands, and feet; tunnel vision, sometimes



accompanied by abnormal blind spots and disturbances in eye movement; impairment of hearing; speech disorders; difficulty in swallowing; loss of balance; a stumbling, awkward gait; clumsiness in handling familiar objects; disturbances in coordination; loss of memory, inability to recall basic things like the alphabet; loss of the ability to concentrate; apathy; feelings of extreme fatigue; mental depression; emotional instability; and a tendency to fits of anxiety and rage." (quoted in Shkilnyk, 185). These early symptoms may gradually get more severe, more difficult to control, and in the end, the patients may die. The disease is believed to be permanent and incurable. At worse, the disease has a serious effect on unborn babies of poisoned mothers. The contamination rate of the babies is much higher than that of the mothers. Therefore, many babies are born with cerebral palsy, deformed limbs, uncontrollable muscle spasms, and mentally retardation. The mercury, once absorbed into the body stays for a very long time even after the person stops eating the poisoned food. In addition, the timing when the symptoms start to appear varies in every case, so the patients cannot escape from the fear of getting an attack of the disease forever.

In the late 1960s, awareness of the relationship between industrial discharge of mercury and environmental mercury pollution started to become worldwide. However, the Canadian government did not pay much attention to this issue. In 1969, Norbald Femreite, a graduate student at the University of Western Ontario, warned the government that the southern part of the Saskatchewan River had an extremely high level of mercury

contamination. Soon after, it was found out that fish from some areas in Ontario were contaminated more than forty times the standard level set by the government.

In 1970, dumping mercury into the environment was banned for all the companies in the province of Ontario which had had any mercury use by the Ontario Minister of Energy and Resource Management. Two months later, commercial fishing in all lakes and side streams of the English-Wabigoon river system was prohibited by the Ontario government. In the area of the river system, from Dryden to Manitoba bay, it was found that the fish had been contaminated as much as the fish of Minamata Bay. Researchers estimated it would take fifty to seventy years to have the river system clean again (Shkilnyk, 189).

Dryden Chemicals Limited, a paper mill company, a subordinate division of Reed Paper Limited, was the company that discharged the large amount of mercury into the river system. Dryden dumped mercury which was used in their operation process into the environment through the water and the air. Into the English-Wabigoon river system, they discharged over 20,000 pounds of mercury, about a half of the whole amount that the company discharged into the whole environment. However, Dryden Chemicals Limited didn't accept any responsibility for the pollution for the whole of 1970s, even though the government of Ontario stated that "The major source of mercury pollution in the area is the chlor-alkali plant/pulp and paper complex in Dryden, Ontario" (quoted in Shkilnyk, 190).

The people of Grassy Narrows, who had lived in the English-Wabigoon river system for a long time, received another shock to their lives in addition to the relocation. After the mercury poisoning of the river system was found, symptoms which seemed to be similar to those of Minamata disease started to appear in the community. The situation of the community of Grassy Narrows got more complicated.

Diagnosing mercury intoxication is very difficult, because its symptoms are very similar to those of other disorders and illnesses: which means it is hard to tell the bodily conditions are caused by mercury poisoning or not. In 1975, Masazumi Harada, one of the top diagnosticians of mercury poisoning in the world, visited Grassy Narrows and Whitedog, an Indian community also located on the English-Wabigoon river system, and did research. However, he couldn't diagnose the people of the two communities as being poisoned by mercury.

Health surveys were conducted... on the two reservations by the same methods applied in our mass examination for Minamata disease in Japan... Many neurological symptoms were found. It cannot be concluded that all of these symptoms resulted from methyl mercury. However, symptoms observed frequently in Minamata disease... were immediately recognized.

... disturbance of eye movement...; impaired hearing...; sensory disturbance...; contraction of the visual field...; tremor...; hyporeflexia (diminution of reflexes)...; ataxia...; dysarthria.... The neurological symptoms are

characteristic of mercury poisoning. However, the symptoms are relatively mild, and many of them were thought to be caused by other factors." (quoted in Shkilnyk, 195)

He concluded that the effect of mercury in causing the variety of neurological symptoms among the people in the communities was "possible" but not certain. J.S. Prichard, another famous neurologist who had studied methyl mercury poisoning, visited Grassy Narrows and Whitedog in 1978 and did several tests on the residents. He also found it difficult to diagnose the people as being poisoned by mercury. According to Prichard:

I found a number of people [at Grassy Narrows] with tremors... I found a number of people who were not very skillful with their hand movements. There was minor pathology, minor neurological abnormality. The trouble is that with the small amounts of mercury [in blood], the kinds of symptoms and signs that they have are very nonspecific. The first thing is tingling in the fingers or very slight tremor. Alcohol will lead to a tremor, and it'll lead to staggering and so on, which is the same kind of thing that mercury can do... Whether the pins and needles or the tremor has been caused by mercury, or one of the numerous other things that can cause it, is a very difficult decision indeed. And in fact in an individual case, I don't believe you can tell. I think you need an epidemiological study to really decide whether mercury's involved or not." (quoted in

Shkilnyk, 196)

Not only the poison's biological damage but also its psychological damage was also seriously harmful for the people of Grassy Narrows. At that time, the aboriginal people didn't get enough explanation about the poison and the disease caused by it, so they didn't understand what it was, and how it would affect them. Fear and confusion about the poison spread among the people. Also, reports in the mass media scared the people of Grassy Narrows. The media reported illustrating mercury as "a slow killer that was already crippling the people of Grassy Narrows and Whitedog and causing social violence" (quoted in Shkilnyk, 210). The levels of the Indian people's fear, uncertainty, and confusion for the effects of mercury on them increased. The people of Grassy Narrows were anxious about this poison which they could not see or taste, but which stayed inside their bodies. In addition to this, stopping fishing was very damaging for the people, especially for commercial fishermen and guides of tourist fishing, not only economically, but also emotionally. They felt like they had changed from food producers to food consumers. This damage to the Grassy Narrows community created their feelings of loss and betrayal through the nature which they had always loved. This accelerated abnormal drinking and self-destructive behaviors, and caused social breakdown in the community.

### **Social Problems in Grassy Narrows**

After the relocation in the middle of 1960s, the extensive use of alcohol spread in the community of Grassy Narrows. From a very high prevalence of alcoholism in the society in the 1970s, we can see how severely troubled and demoralized the community was. First of all, what is the difference between normal alcohol use and alcohol abuse? Drinking moderate amounts of alcohol that does not significantly interfere with social, educational, or occupational functioning is an acceptable use of alcohol. On the other hand, when one drinks to the extent that education, job, or relationships with others are disrupted, if one puts oneself in physically dangerous situations, and if one has related legal problems because of the alcohol that you ingest, an individual would be considered an alcohol abuser (Barlow, Durand, 389).

Binge drinking at Grassy Narrows is usually quite different from the "white man's way" of drinking. First, Indian people regard drinking as a social activity. They usually get together to drink; they seldom drink alone. Second, people keep drinking until they lose their consciousness. Drinking is a continuous process for them. They call a time period when they are unconscious a "blackout". Most accidents and violent acts happen during the blackout period. Third, the majority of heavy drinkers in Grassy Narrows are not always addicted to alcohol physically. That means, for instance, they could wait for the next payday without drinking when they do not have cash to buy

liquor. Although after payday, the people will go to town to buy liquor and start a drinking spree again. Fourth, a binge lasting for a long time is like a hurricane that disrupts the community. During the binge, babies become dehydrated, children go hungry, women get beaten, and young girls are often raped. People of Grassy Narrows often get alcohol-related illnesses, so the community has the highest hospitalization rate among the seven Indian communities in the Kenora area.

Alcohol abuse is often lined with violent behavior. A number of studies have revealed that many violent crimes such as murder, rape, and assault happen when the people who commit those crimes are intoxicated with alcohol (Barlow, Durand, 390). Grassy Narrows is not an exception. The people of Grassy Narrows often commit crimes while they are drunk or they commit alcohol-related crimes. Three-quarters of all charges made by the police in one year are liquor offenses. In the period of 1966-74, among all the people who were in the Kenora jail, 77 percent were there for liquor offenses.

Before the relocation, in the period 1959-63, the reason for 91 percent of all deaths in the Grassy Narrows community was natural causes. However, associated with the move to the new location in the middle of 1960s, over two decades, deaths caused by violence became very common in the community. Three out of every four persons died in a violent act. The number of people who committed or tried to commit suicide surely shows the community's self-destructive responses to unacceptable social situations. In 1977 and 78, twenty-six young people, almost one-fifth

(17 percent) of all the population in Grassy Narrows aged eleven to nineteen tried to commit suicide. Three of the attempts actually succeeded. The number of suicide attempts shows depression, hopelessness, a loss of mooring, and erosion of the symbols in the community.

Widespread alcohol abuse in Grassy Narrows took parental responsibility away from the parents, and the children were abused physically, seriously neglected, or just abandoned. So, more than one-third of the children were taken away from their families. The children spent their childhood and their adolescence with no guidance or love which should be given by the adults around them. Those children who were from heavy drinking families did not have emotional and physical security. They could feel a sense of belonging only when they were in a gang. On the new reserve, one often sees children get close to each other to have warmth, and companionship, when their family members are drinking. At Grassy Narrows, the number of crimes committed by children aged fifteen or under increased significantly after the relocation. In 1978, almost one-third of all the children in the community between eight and fifteen years old were on probation for criminal acts, and two thirds of them were aged between twelve and fifteen. All of those children came from drinking families, which were categorized as the heaviest drinkers on the reserve.

The life on the new reserve was terrible for the children of alcoholic families. Mothers no longer prepared proper food for their families, so the children did not get fed. The mothers



bought cans of spaghetti, cans of meat stew, and a lot of junk food. Almost no one sat around a table and had a meal as a family. Because the children could not get enough food to eat, and they could not get any place to sleep, there were many small children wandering around the reserve at night. The children were sad, hopeless, and hungry. Among children of Grassy Narrows, sniffing gasoline was very common so that they could get high, and escape from reality. It was especially widespread among the children who were from heavy drinking families. Even children in first grade of elementary school often sniffed gasoline. Sniffing gasoline may cause permanent destruction of brain cells, and the brain damage as a result of it can be rapid and mortal. Even if a child does not want to sniff gasoline, the child would be forced to do so by the leader or members of the gang group that the child belongs to. Sniffing gasoline was a social activity for kids of Grassy Narrows, much like drinking alcohol for adults of the community. Sadly, having an experience of being neglected in their childhood left no idea of life, and no idea of wanting to live. For the children, it seems that the parents cared about them only after they are dead.

Before the relocation, on the old reserve, families in Grassy Narrows had a very strong bond, and the family members respected and accepted each other. There were strong taboos against incest, promiscuity, and marriage between close relatives from the same bloodline. However, the bonds of the Grassy Narrows families devastated after the relocation in the middle of the 1960s. Usually, family members of the same bloodline

gather and have drinking binges together. During those drinking parties, the taboos against incest or sexual relations among close relatives did not mean anything for them. Gang rapes happen frequently, even among family members. A former chief explained the situation as follows:

Indian people used to use tobacco to communicate with the spirits, but they never learned to use alcohol with respect. Alcohol was the white man's poison, and now it's ours. Look at what happens during the drinking parties. You think it's just because of the alcohol, but I tell you, it's just a cover-up for a lot of angry, hurt feelings. The gang rapes... a group of men will sometimes conspire to ask a young girl to a drinking party. They will give her drink until she passes out. Then they will each have sex with her. If the girl is not quite passed out, the experience can be very bad for her, especially if her father is involved in the gang rape. There have been cases where the girl tried to commit suicide after the experience. (quoted in Shkilnyk, 46)

### **Clear-Cutting**

Recently, since the 1990s, the community of Grassy Narrows has been facing a new problem, clear-cutting within their traditional territory. Abitibi Consolidated and Weyerhaeuser, pulp and paper companies in Canada significantly expanded their logging in the Whiskey Jack Forest, which falls within the

traditional land of Grassy Narrows. Clear-cutting within their traditional territory has been occurring since 1950s, but the way of cutting has become more devastating since 1990s. Because of this wide-ranging logging, the people of Grassy Narrows lost an extensive part of their land, which is important to their traditional way of life, including trapping, and berry picking. In December 2002, the people of Grassy Narrows set up a blockade in the path which was used by industrial logging equipment in order to stop them from entering the community's traditional land. The blockade has been standing for five years. It is the longest term aboriginal blockade in the history of Canada. In January, 2007, leaders of the Grassy Narrows community proclaimed a moratorium on any additional industrial activity which is not agreed to by them within their traditional lands.

Simon Fobister, Council Chief of Grassy Narrows, stated that: "We have been seeking for many years a constructive solution to this untenable situation, but the response has always been talk and log. We cannot sit back and watch the demise of our way of life which disappears more every time more cutting areas are extended to Abitibi and Weyerhaeuser," (quoted in Rainforest Action Network).

There is a little contradiction between views of the companies and the Grassy Narrow community. According to the policy on the relationships with aboriginal people published by Weyerhaeuser, they state that they have "a framework for building mutually beneficial relationships with Aboriginal peoples who are affected by Weyerhaeuser's Canadian operation"

(Weyerhaeuser, 2). They also declared in the policy that they are seeking opportunities for them to "work together constructively with an Aboriginal group or business toward a shared goal" (Weyerhaeuser, 2). Abitibi Consolidated has also outlined its commitment to the aboriginal people of the area. According to their statement on public participation, the forest "...is also an essential factor in the lives of other users: various communities, Aboriginal people, ..." (Abitibi Consolidated). And they believe that "the needs of different forest users need to be brought into harmony" (Abitibi Consolidated). However, even though those companies have outlined their thoughts on the aboriginal relationships in their policies and statements and said that they are trying to make the relationships better, and to solve the problems that they have, their actual activities show little concern about the aboriginal people and their lives. In reality, claims that the people of Grassy Narrows are making have not been listened to by those companies and the government.

Grassy Narrows has been fighting for its land with help from the Rainforest Action Network, an international environmental group which is based on San Francisco, U.S.A., and Amnesty International, an international non-governmental organization for protecting human rights.

## **Conclusion**

The people of Grassy Narrows have been troubled with the effects of decisions made by the government without their

agreement, or even sufficient consultation. The severely devastated social situation of Grassy Narrows in the late 1970s began to change and became slightly better during the 1980s. However, the change was mostly caused by the efforts of the people themselves (Bray). In 1985, the Grassy Narrows community received \$8.7 million as compensation from the Canadian government, the Ontario government, and the paper-mill companies (Shkilnyk, 230). Even though there has been a light of hope in the community, it is not the end of the problems yet. When Masazumi Harada, a Japanese neurologist, visited Grassy Narrows for his third time in 2004, he concluded his observation on the reserve that the symptoms were as bad as he had assumed when he visited there the last time, in 2002. Harada also stated that the residents of Grassy Narrows who were affected by the mercury poisoning should be offered reparation not only by money, but also in other ways. He said that rebuilding the community's social structure, such as more established medical services, a more secure economy, and quality of life is needed to solve the remaining problems (Aiken). The people of Grassy Narrows used to have great love and respect for their people and nature while they lived on their traditional way of life. But since mainstream Canadian society started interfering with them, the people of the community have been facing continuous severe social problems. It may take some time to get all the problems solved; however, the people have become strong enough to stand up and protect their land rights and the health of their community.

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