

# Innu Nation Deal Trades Reparation for River Power

A deal to build new hydroelectric plants in Labrador includes redress for a native tribe that lost its land to a dam 40 years ago.

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**This month, Elizabeth Penashue will leave her home in the Innu village of Sheshatshiu ([map](#)), just as she has the past 14 summers, to canoe up the Churchill River—a waterway that has been a wellspring of both life and pain for her people.**

**The 67-year-old Innu elder will take a group with her, and teach them about the longest river in Atlantic Canada's northernmost region of Labrador, and how she grew up trapping, hunting, and camping along its now-altered banks. It was a nomadic life—and as she recalls, an idyllic one—that changed utterly when the hydroelectric plant came.**

Now, she will tell her fellow paddlers, the Churchill River is to be changed again.

But this time, when the water is tapped anew for energy, the Innu will be part of the deal. The "[New Dawn Agreement](#)," approved overwhelmingly by the tribe this summer, seeks to compensate the Innu First Nation for the first time for the flooding of 2,000 square miles (5,000 square kilometers) of native hunting grounds in the late 1960s to feed Churchill Falls, the second-largest hydroelectric plant in Canada. The deal also clears the way for the \$6.2 billion (\$6.1 billion U.S.) construction of two new hydro stations and transmission lines on the lower Churchill, a project its developers say will mine [the most attractive undeveloped hydroelectric site in North America](#).

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The July voting indicates that the vast majority of the tribe's members agree that the deal is a good one for the Innu, with \$2 million (CDN) annually through the year 2041 for upper Churchill redress and minimum yearly revenue of \$5 million (CDN) from the tribe's stake in the lower Churchill projects. The Innu also will gain hunting rights over 13,000 square miles (34,000 square kilometers) of land.

But the scars of the tribe's forced displacement four decades ago run deep, and the prospect of altering the landscape with two new dams and reservoirs rankles some. It has pitted old against young and family members against each other, in perhaps no

case more starkly than the Penashues. As she sets oar on her annual river trip this summer, Elizabeth will decry the New Dawn Agreement—the deal negotiated for years by the man who now serves as tribal chief, her own son, Peter.

## **A Painful History**

Sheshatshiu (traditionally pronounced Shay-ha-jeet, but also rendered Sheh-sha-shee, and sometimes written Sheshatsiu) is a collection of houses on the shores of Lake Melville, separated by bridge from the slightly larger town of Northwest River. Along with Natuashish, it is one of two seats of power for the Innu First Nation in Labrador, which consists of a little more than 2,000 people, according to Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada.

The Innu were forced to settle here in the late 1960s when the native land where they roamed freely was flooded to create Smallwood Reservoir and the 5,428-megawatt Churchill Falls generating station. Among the hydro plants that provide 60 percent of Canada's electricity, the 11-turbine Churchill Falls is second in size only to the huge Robert-Bourassa generating station on the La Grande River in Quebec. And the two are the largest underground power stations in the world.

But the project, a joint venture of the Canadian government-owned corporations, Nalcor Energy and Hydro-Quebec, upended the world of the Innu, whose lives were centered around the forested river and its falls, which had a natural 1,000-foot (300-meter) drop.

When the Upper Churchill generating plant was built, the river was routed around Churchill Falls and into a series of underground tubes, flooding the land upstream.

"It hurts me when I think about it," says Elizabeth Penashue. "If my father tried to go back now, he'd be lost. It's all flooded. When people went [into the bush] they stayed there a couple of months hunting. When men or women or babies died, they buried them there, because it's too far from Sheshatshiu. The burial grounds are the water. So many things we lost belonging to the Innu."

Max Penashue, one of Elizabeth's seven sons, owns a convenience store and a restaurant here in Sheshatshiu. He believes the destruction of the native lands was a blow from which his people never recovered. Alcoholism is rampant, he laments. As he stands amidst a collection of boarded-up buildings, unsupervised children tear through the streets on dirt bikes and four-wheelers.

But Max, unlike his mother, believes the land the tribe now stands to gain in the New Dawn Agreement, will go a long way toward healing the spirit of the Innu. He cast his vote for it in July, as did 84 percent of the community in Sheshatshiu and 96 percent in Natuashish.

## **New Dams Prompt Complex Emotions**

The two new proposed power stations on the lower Churchill River, at Muskrat Falls and Gull Island, would have a combined capacity of 3,074 megawatts, enough to supply hundreds of thousands of households. Nalcor, the Crown power corporation of Newfoundland and Labrador, says the new renewable power will allow it to shut down an old oil-fired generation station. "The Project is a major part of the Province's strategy to reduce [greenhouse gas] emissions from increased electricity demand, Nalcor says.

At Muskrat Falls, the proposed 59-kilometer dam will flood 41 square kilometers of land, while the Gull Island project's planned 232-kilometer dam will create a reservoir that covers 85 square kilometers.

Some local opponents are galled that the project likely will be providing most of its electricity to the more populous Maritime provinces to the south.

"They need to learn to live more simply, and figure out a better way to do it," says Jane McGillivray, a former public health official in Sheshatshiu who now lives in Northwest River. Not a member of the Innu tribe herself, she says she has seen the ills in the community that resulted from displacement, and fears the cycle of woe will repeat. "It's going to be a sad day when that dam goes through."

But the complex emotions over the proposed development are apparent in McGillivray's own family. Her college-age son, Daniel, who is training to be an electrical engineer, says that while he does not support the new hydroelectric plants, there is a potential silver lining. It would mean he might be able to get a job near home, an appealing prospect in a province that many young people leave after college. The New Dawn Agreement specifies that jobs for the new power plant would go first to members of the Innu Nation, then to Labrador residents, and Nalcor estimates \$450 million from the project would go to local businesses and residents.

Elizabeth Penashue argues that the best legacy to leave future generations is preservation of the remaining untouched portions of the 532-mile (856-kilometer) Churchill River.

"Myself, I'm very concerned," she said recently on a quiet morning before breakfast. "I think most old people are very concerned. Young people, they just think about right now."

For Elizabeth, the fight against the lower Churchill project caps years of environmental activism. In the 1980s, she led a successful campaign against low-flying military aircraft, which created sonic booms as they passed over Innu land. In that campaign, her son Peter was by her side.

Peter later served as grand chief, and later deputy grand chief, of the Innu Nation. While in his leadership role, knowing well the grievances of the past, Peter says he saw a crucial opening years ago when the provincial government of Newfoundland and Labrador sought Innu approval for the developments on the Lower Churchill.

### **Hope for a Better Future**

When Peter ran successfully this year to become the first Innu member of Parliament from Labrador, he made the successful completion of the power plants a central issue in his campaign. He is now the minister of intergovernmental affairs, the first Innu cabinet member, and hails the agreement as a path to financial independence for the Innu.

"I personally spent 20 years of my life working and negotiating with the government of Canada and the government of Newfoundland and Labrador on the future of the Innu Nation," he said. "It's been long, hard years, very difficult years of hard work to get all the agreements in place . . . I know that it is a good agreement, and it's a good agreement for future generations of the Innu people, it's a good agreement for Newfoundland and Labrador, and it's a good agreement for Canada."

He laments that others, including his loved ones, disagree. "Sometimes it's very difficult for other people, particularly in this case, my mother, to understand that the Lower Churchill [agreement] is part of the Upper Churchill, and it is part of the land claims," he says, "She'll tell you that she likes the land claims, she'll tell you that she likes the Upper Churchill redress, but she'll tell you that she doesn't like the Lower Churchill [project]. It's been a challenge for us to explain that these agreements are inseparable."

Elizabeth Penashue takes an obvious pride in her son's accomplishments, and believes that they both work to better the Innu Nation—he from the inside, she from the outside.

Max Penashue is optimistic for the future of the Innu Nation. The agreement may be imperfect, but it is a good one, he says, and the best they are likely to get. As a shaman, he is part of a group that supports a return to Innu traditions, and he sees having their own land, clearly defined, as a way to do that, and opens a path to self-determination for the tribe. What happens after that, he says, will depend on the strength of future Innu leadership, but it is a future he is eager to see begin.

"We've been fighting the government for decades," he says, "and it is finally coming to an end with this agreement."

*This story is part of a special series that explores energy issues. For more, visit [The Great Energy Challenge](#).*

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