

Indigenous Health: Environmental Injustice & Colonialism in the Grassy Narrows Population

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Introduction

The Asubpeeschoseewagong, or the Grassy Narrows First Nation have experienced one of the most detrimental aftermaths of environmental toxicity in the history of Canada [1]. In 1962, Dryden Chemicals, an industrial paper and pulp plant, was built in Dryden, Ontario, Canada [1, 2]. From 1962 to 1970, Dryden Chemicals, upstream of Grassy Narrows, leaked approximately 10,000 kg of mercury into the English-Wabigoon River [3, 2]. Mercury poisoning, or toxicity from the consumption of mercury, has adverse repercussions on human health [4]. Research indicates that eating mercury-containing seafood such as fish which contaminated 90% of the Grassy Narrows residents, left devastating intergenerational outcomes that are still experienced in this population today [5]. This paper aims to analyze the role of the Canadian government, class structure, and colonialism in the health effects of mercury poisoning in the Grassy Narrows community.

The role of the Canadian government

The prime agenda of the Canadian government in the 1800s to 1900s era was to build a nation through establishing colonies and the assimilation of Indigenous populations [3]. In the late 18th century, the Royal Proclamation Act enabled European settlers to create colonies in Indigenous territories and conduct business [5]. This was a major step towards instilling settler colonial practices and controlling land in Grassy Narrows. As a result of this policy, companies that dealt with hazardous chemicals were constructed near

Indigenous communities [5].

In the 1940s, the Ontario government controlled the community's fishing practices through the implementation of policies of conservation and management [6]. Due to the strategy of forced licensing and regulation, the government weakened the subsistence economy of Grassy Narrows such as fishing, trapping, and hunting [3].

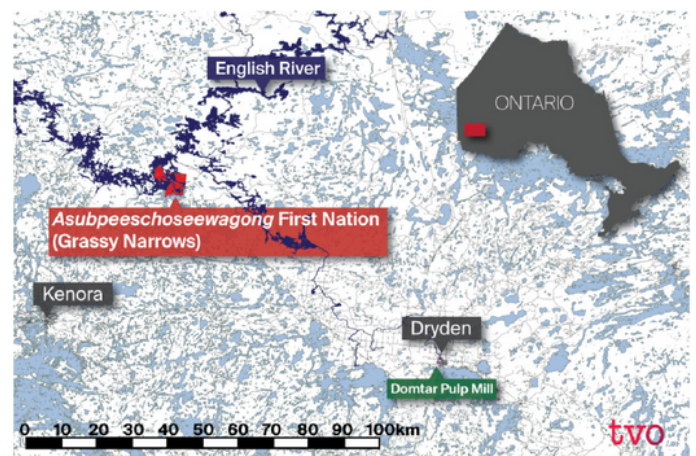


Figure 1. The colour red in the map above showcases the areas of exposure in the Grassy Narrows community. The dark blue colour is illustrative of the route of exposure through the English-Wabigoon River. Finally, the grey colour is representative of the source of the environmental hazard, Dryden Chemicals [6].

Furthermore, in 2017, the provincial government committed \$85 million to clean up the alarming levels of contamination that persists in the English-Wabigoon River, but to this date, no initiative as started [6].

The chronic neglect of Grassy Narrows First Nation by Canada has had an impact on their well-being. About 60% of the Canadian non-Indigenous population report their health as “good or excellent”, in comparison to 21% of people living in Grassy Narrows [8]. Studies also disclose that about 10% of all teens in this population have now developed psychological illnesses such as depression and anxiety [8, 9]. To add to this, in Grassy Narrows, 37% of children aged 9 to 11 have emotional and behavioral problems, 23% of youth aged 12 to 17 years have chronic ear infections, and 52% of the youth struggle in school due to decreased attention span and difficulty understanding [10]. Hence, the policies and agenda of the Canadian government has caused the Grassy Narrows population to face troubling health outcomes.

Class structure

While the First Nations of Grassy Narrows faced life-threatening problems, Dryden Chemicals continued to reap the benefits of exploiting Indigenous land [1]. When mercury poisoning was discovered in 1970, Dryden Chemicals changed their name to prevent liabilities [2]. However, they remained under the same management and acquired net profits of \$235 million, with an average of \$40 million every year [3]. In 1985, Dryden Chemicals paid \$50 million in dividends [3]. This shows class oppression because while Dryden Chemicals continued to gain revenue, the low-income Indigenous population of Grassy Narrows experienced disastrous financial turbulences due to mercury poisoning [8]. In particular, for adults aged 18 to 49 years old, mercury poisoning was higher among those that did poorly in school and earned less than \$20,000 dollars a year [10].

A study revealed that Indigenous men who worked in the commercial and recreational fishing industries were more vulnerable to the

consequences of consuming mercury poisoned fish [1].

Further, small budgets as well as a colonial regime and market economy that undermined Indigenous food sovereignty led to irregular diets that in return, contributed to type 2 diabetes, cancer, and thyroid-related diseases that were previously never observed in Grassy Narrows [9, 10]. The economic losses from the fishing ban imposed by the government caused a 95% unemployment rate in this population [3]. Unemployment resulted in heightened the rates of alcoholism, negative self-evaluations, and daily violence [9]. Thus, class structure-based oppression has ravaged the Indigenous land and people of Grassy Narrows who were and still are facing socioeconomic hardships due to mercury poisoning [3].

Colonialism

Mercury poisoning in Grassy Narrows can not simply be recognized as an incident of environmental injustice without looking at the embedded colonial practices. Colonial strategies often stem from patterns of misrecognition of minority cultures [2]. Misrecognition appears in the form of degradation and devaluation of cultural groups [4]. Damage to the Anishinaabe land by Dryden Chemicals and the government was devastating for the Grassy Narrows population because their territory is embedded within their identity. Removing Indigenous peoples from their traditional land and polluting it compromises their spirituality, culture, and collective survival [2]. Henceforth, misrecognition and domination tactics that are deeply rooted in the public and private spheres have resulted in the industrial destruction of the Grassy Narrows ways of life [10].

Moreover, in the historical context, science's role was not objective when issues caused by colonialism arose [5]. Science has long been manipulated and ignored to favor those in power and oppose people suffering from oppression by class structures and colonialism [7]. Science was a colonial tool for oppression in the case Grassy Narrows as scientists downplayed evidence of mercury poisoning [3]. For instance, Dr. Masazumi Harada suppressed the ramifications of mercury poisoning [4]. This prolonged the harmful consequences of mercury being dumped in the Indigenous territory of Grassy Narrows [4]. First Nations people in this area who were diagnosed with mercury poisoning were six times more likely to develop a neuropsychological disease, five times more likely to have intestinal deficits, and three times more likely to experience blindness or vision problems [8]. Government officials and scientists hiding the complications of mercury poisoning in Grassy Narrows exemplifies the hidden colonial agenda that was engrained in this crisis. The reality is that the severity of mercury poisoning was downplayed, demonstrating institutionalized oppression of Grassy Narrows First Nation [3].

Conclusion

An analysis of the role of the Canadian government in mercury poisoning showcases that a primary objective of the Canadian government in the 1900s was the assimilation and political and economic domination of Indigenous people [2]. The Canadian government adopted strategies such as avoiding the clean-up project and suppressing scientific evidence of mercury poisoning in Grassy Narrows [7].

Even in 2023, there is little action nor initiative from the government geared towards the immediate support for the environmental

toxicity caused from mercury poisoning. In addition, scrutinizing the general class structure indicates that capitalist corporations have reaped the benefits of improperly disposing mercury, whereas the low-income First Nations of Grassy Narrows continue to experience negative health outcomes [10]. Finally, examining the concept of colonialism in the Grassy Narrows context stipulates that the effects of mercury poisoning are largely a result of policies that were designed to take control of Indigenous populations and their lands [3]. All-in-all, the Canadian government must urgently work with Grassy Narrows First Nations to remediate the environment and hold the industry accountable for the detrimental harms that it caused. [7]. The story of Grassy Narrows is one that needs to be told to every Canadian, not only for the purposes of raising awareness, but also starting conversations of truth and reconciliation, and decolonization.

References

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