

CONSERVATION

TheStar.com | Insight | A native grandmother's epic walk for the water
A native grandmother's epic walk for the water

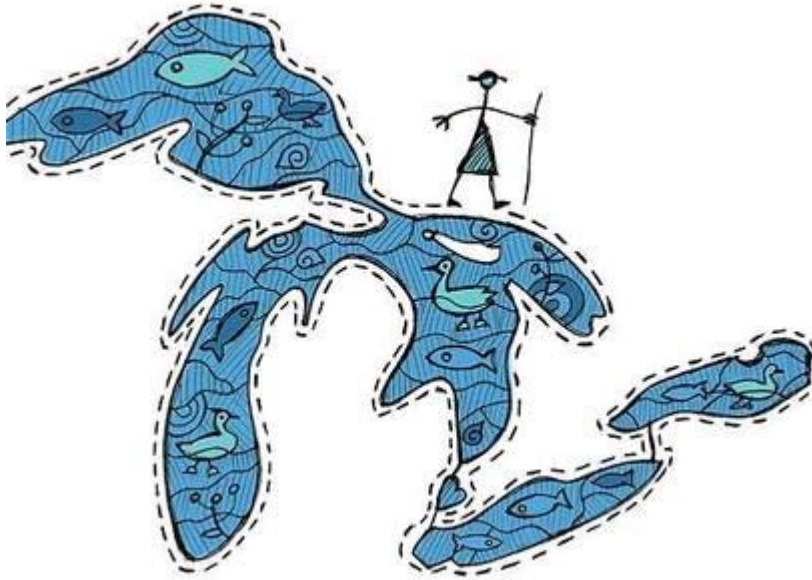


ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN HUGHES

Josephine Mandamin set out six years ago to walk around the Great Lakes. She's made it 17,000 km so far and shamed us along the way
Apr 04, 2009 Kevin McMahon - special to the star

KINGSTON—Josephine Mandamin warms you with her grandmotherly smile and speaks in soft aboriginal tones that lull you into agreement, even as she conks you on the head.

"I really think – and I don't like saying it either – that it seems that it's always been the native people that bring these things to light ... to awaken people."

What Mandamin, an Anishinabe elder from Thunder Bay, wants illuminated is environmental collapse. And while you might be perturbed by the notion that aboriginals care more about that than the rest of us, it should be pointed out that Mandamin has walked 17,000 kilometres to reinforce her point.

Mandamin grew up on Manitoulin Island, eating fresh fish daily and drinking straight from Georgian Bay. During her lifetime, she has seen the Great Lakes nearly ruined – the fish killed by invasive species, the harbours poisoned, and, now, the water evaporating into the clouds of global warming.

Since the lakes provide drinking water to 35 million people, you'd think their health would be a raging public issue. But it has ebbed and flowed from public consciousness since the Cuyahoga River fire of 1969.

In 2005, more than 60 scientists endorsed a report declaring the Great Lakes ecosystem so stressed that it's nearing "irreversible" collapse – a prediction ignored by most of the region's media.

First Nations' grandmothers do not love their grandkids more than you love yours, but they may have a clearer view of the horizon.

In the Anishinabe tradition, women fetch the water. So, in 2003, when Mandamin was "moved by the spirits" to speak out for the Great Lakes, it was natural for her to pick up her copper pail and start walking. She decided to circle the lakes and tell people that "the water is sick ... and people need to really fight for that water, to speak for that water, to love that water."

Every spring since, Mandamin and a small band of followers have walked around one of the lakes. Next weekend they depart from the Katarokwi Native Friendship Centre here to walk up the St. Lawrence River. Their mission will end where the lakes' water pours into the Atlantic Ocean (bearing so much poison that a quarter of the male beluga whales in the Gulf of St. Lawrence have cancer).

At every tributary, Mandamin stops and talks directly to the water, offering prayers, tobacco and thanks. "I've heard so many times, 'You're crazy...'" she says. "But we know it's not a crazy thing we're doing; we know it's for the betterment of the next generations."

Walking up the St. Lawrence, Josephine will soon reach Akwesasne, which straddles the river at Cornwall and is renowned for its gambling, smuggling and Mohawk warriors. But 40 years ago, Akwesasne was known for its farms and fishery, which had thrived for at least 3,000 years and made it a pillar of the legendary Iroquois Confederacy. Henry Lickers, head of Akwesasne's environment department, likes to remind Torontonians that the reserve shipped its extra food to our soup kitchens during the Depression, yet we didn't even notice when its economy disappeared.

The fisherman and farmers were ruined by the industries that came with the St. Lawrence Seaway. Domtar Paper and General Motors poisoned the fish with, respectively, mercury and PCBs. Alcoa pumped so much fluoride into the air that cows' teeth grew brittle and broke, and they died. Pollution also caused the farms to go bust.

Henry Lickers draws a straight line from the ruin of Mohawk agriculture to the rise of the privateers and their warrior platoons. "People look at me kind of funny when I say PCBs caused the Oka Crisis. But that's what happened."

There are some 800 outstanding native land claims in Canada. Most concern the three-fifths of the country that urbanites view as trackless expanse, resource companies see as a storehouse, and rural First Nations call home. These claims sow perpetual conflict as industrialists race to strip disputed land while its once-and-future owners struggle to protect it. It is not NIMBYism that pushes natives to the barricades, but a well-founded premonition of apocalypse.

We only hear about these struggles when they're bloody or inconvenient. If you block the 401, the media come running. But make your stand in the sticks, as did Algonquins blocking uranium mining near Peterborough, and you're thrown in jail without even getting on TV.

When he was Indian Affairs Minister, Jim Prentice, now Minister of the Environment, said: "Blockades are not in anyone's interest... The worst thing, I think, is that they erode the goodwill that exists toward aboriginal people."

That sounds reasonable, but it's not true. For every situation that devolves into a bitter mess like the Caledonia standoff, there are two in which non-natives cheer to see rapacious extractors hobbled.

Consider Haida Gwaii, the B.C. archipelago often called "Canada's Galapagos." Its Sitka spruce take 800 years to grow 90 metres. Multinational paper companies were furiously felling these behemoths until the exasperated Haida – whose culture was built of cedar and spruce – set up blockades. So began a drama that raged on muddy roads for decades and ultimately brought the islands' two communities – native and non-native – together.

The latter knew the Haida were not against logging; they'd always been loggers. But everyone also knew the multinationals would rape the forest, then lay everybody off and leave. So loggers and fishermen stood with the Haida on the blockades until they won.

But these struggles are not undertaken lightly, and some native communities – fearing strained relations with neighbours and the possibility of people getting hurt – don't resort to blockades. Then again, doing nothing is not an option in communities where many still feel bound by the Great Law. Codified by the Iroquois Confederacy, it dictates that every societal action be weighed for its impact on the next seven generations. That's not an abstraction for Josephine Mandamin. "My third great-grandchild will be born soon," she says. "If I live long enough, maybe that child will have a child... I may see five generations before I die."

So, should you be driving along the 401 next week and spot an old lady carrying a brass bucket, ask not for whom she carries that water. She carries it for us all.

Kevin McMahon is the director of Waterlife, a documentary about the Great Lakes.

Josephine Mandamin appears in the film, which premieres next month at Hot Docs.