

Elliot Lake

There were 12 uranium mines opened near Elliot Lake in the early 1950s to supply uranium to the American nuclear weapons program. The radioactive tailings from mining and milling were dumped into ten lakes close to the mines. The contamination killed all ten lakes and 90 kilometres of the Serpent River. The Canadian Government allowed a sulphuric acid plant to be built in the middle of the nearby First Nations community of Serpent River with no concern for its impact on the residents.

In 1974, the Ontario Government appointed Dr. James Ham to study mine safety at Elliot Lake. He concluded that "Neither the workers nor their representatives were advised about the emerging status of the problem of lung cancer." Dr. Ham, a Past president of the University of Toronto also conducted an inquiry into the actions of the Workers Compensation Board in the 1970s. The inquiry led to the reversal of over 100 compensation claims against radiation induced illnesses and death. According to nuclear professor, Dr. Andrews:

"James Ham had at that time (1976) discovered that, in spite of the assurances of the WCB and other medical experts, deaths were now coming off the assembly line." (Dr. Andrews, University of Toronto, 1996)

The balance of this section on Elliot Lake is taken directly from Lorraine Rekmans book, 'This is My Homeland.' It is an account of the degradation of their way of life caused by the uranium mines, the sulphuric acid plant and the disregard to their health shown by the Canadian government.

"The resultant contamination, destruction and degradation of hunting, fishing and gathering areas is grossly offensive and inevitably an assault on an entire way of life shared by the original people for generations. There are ten lakes lost for eternity at Elliot Lake. These lakes were used as dumping grounds for radioactive waste. There is no sanitary way to describe the incident."

"The miners at Elliot Lake lost their lives digging this rock out of the ground. The ground-waters under the tailings basins are virtual rivers of poison. The people who worked and lived around the sulphuric acid plant suffered severely."

"Good clear drinking water and fish habitat, wildlife, and plants have been destroyed for the benefit of a few people. Weapons producers, nuclear energy developers, and others have demonstrated no regard for the sanctity of an entire ecosystem. They have demonstrated total disrespect and disregard for an entire community of people who rely on this land to survive. They were privy to information about the known

dangers of uranium before the mines were opened and did not share this knowledge with vulnerable and unsuspecting people."

"In essence, their accumulated wealth was at the cost of uncounted human lives. The impact and health effects, the disease, and cancer resulting from the contaminated tailings sites and the sulphuric acid plant has yet to be measured. The voices of Anishnabe people need to be heard. Their story needs to be acknowledged."

The devastating effects of nuclear industries on this remote Anishnabe community undeniably and unmistakably involve international corporations, governments and institutions. We must face the broad issues of responsibility for severe harms and dangers. The need to act is critical.

– 1963 The United Steelworkers of America discover that despite knowledge of the high risks of cancer and other illnesses from radioactivity and chemical toxicity in the mining processes and from the waste tailings, neither mining companies, nor the federal or provincial governments give the 10,000 workers or residents any protection or warning.

– 1955-1978 As reported by the Rio Algom and Denison Uranium Mining companies, more than 30 uranium tailings dam failures occur during this period, dumping radioactive isotopes and chemical toxins into the Serpent River watershed. These dams were constructed to contain uranium tailings, the waste product from mining and milling.

– 1950s-1960s Miners' housing, built in Elliot Lake on roads made of fill mixed with uranium tailings. Fill for housing sites consists of waste rock from mines.

– 1963, 1966, 1976 Ontario Water Resources Commission surveys and reports show high levels of radioactive and chemical contamination in all 55 miles of the Serpent River waterway downstream from the mines and tailings sites. The 1963 survey already shows that 'uranium milling operations had a profound effect on the biota.' No fish are living in the watershed.

– 1969, 1976 Reports by the Ontario Workmen's Compensation Board (1969) and the Royal Commission on the Health and Safety of Workers in Mines (1976) show high levels of lung cancers among Elliot Lake/Serpent River area miners.

– 1975 Power failure at Stanleigh Mine results in a 500,000 gallon spill of radioactive and chemically contaminated water into McCabe Lake.

– 1975 Quirke 2 Mine fractures Serpent River streambed, causing the river to flow into the mine.

"I write this mostly for my children. One day, they will have questions. One day, I might have to explain how we came to this place in time, where we have nuclear bombs, radioactive waste, spent fuel rods, genetic deformities and wastelands." (Lorraine Rekmans, *This Is My Homeland*)

Lorraine Rekmans' book is a series of conversations and short essays by the residents of Serpent River who were most affected by the mines. Though the mines closed in the 1980's, the damage they caused will last for tens of thousands of years. The contamination of the Serpent River watershed can never be undone. The harm they caused the people living there should never be forgotten or forgiven.

Taken from Part 1 of *Nuclear Genocide in Canada*, by Pat McNamara, posted online at

http://www.porthopehistory.com/nucleargenocide/nucleargenocide_index.htm