

Native America

Dumping Grounds: Tribes contend with some of the worst of America's Pollution

Reservations now look good to Promoters of Facilities for Toxic Waste Disposal

By Robert Tomsho

MASSENA, N.Y. - A covey of ducks scurries across the St. Lawrence River as Ward Stone's boat drifts into the bay he calls Contaminant Cove. Mr. Stone, a state wildlife pathologist, pulls an oar from the water and sniffs it for chemicals. Then he peers across the inlet that separates a General Motors Corp. Toxic waste site from the St. Regis Indian Reservation. "You're looking at the worst place in the world to be a duck," he says.

Indian Tribes across America are grappling with some of the worst of its pollution: uranium tailings, chemical lagoons and illegal dumps. Nowhere has it been more troublesome than at this Mohawk reservation the Indians call Akwesasne--"land where the partridge drums."

The Mohawks have fought a long war with GM, Reynolds Metals Co. and Aluminum Co. of America, whose factories have fouled the river that the Tribe once relied on for food, income and spiritual sustenance. "When all else failed," a Mohawk says, "the river provided for us." Mohawk leaders still offer prayers of thanks to the St. Lawrence, but Akwesasne's 9,000 residents no longer can eat the perch and pike from its waters. And fluoride poisoning has decimated cattle herds.

Search for Alternatives

Devastation of the fishing, farming and hunting economy has fostered a host of desperate and divisive money-making ventures, ranging from casino gambling to smuggling. Now, outside investors are asking the Tribe to accommodate such facilities as incinerators and medical waste dumps on reservations.

Businesses that create wastes and businesses that dispose of them are attracted to reservations by their isolation and relative freedom from state and federal regulation and political pressures (the reservations are semi-sovereign). Ventures that generate jobs have a powerful appeal for Tribes mired in poverty, and the waste handlers promise clean, modern facilities.

Thus, California's Campo Indians have contracted for a 600 acre landfill; Arizona's Kaibab-Paiutes are accepting a huge hazardous-waste incinerator; and the Oklahoma Kaws have tentatively agreed to a similar project.

But many Indians remain skeptical. And this is especially so at Akwesasne, given that it has paid a steep price for environmental recklessness of the past.

New Neighbors

The building of the St. Lawrence Seaway in the 1950s gouged out the fishing grounds and changed a way of life forever. The new channel and cheap hydroelectric power induced GM, Reynolds and a slew of Canadian companies to build shoreline factories. They joined Alcoa, which had long had a plant on the Grass River, a St. Lawrence tributary.

With environmental law enforcement still primitive, the Mohawks' corporate neighbors poured industrial wastes into riverside lagoons and landfills and sometimes the river itself. Aluminum smelters belched out fluoride-laced smoke.

In the 1960s, Mohawk ranchers started complaining that cattle grazing up wind from the Reynolds stacks were developing loose teeth, brittle bones and other problems. Farmer Ernest Benedict's Herefords started dying while giving birth. Mohawk hunters discovered strange markings on the hides of small game. Others

reeled in bass and muskellunge with skin ulcers and deformed spines.

In 1978, studies by scientists from Cornell and other universities indicated that the sickly cattle were suffering from fluoride poisoning. They also found high levels of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) and other toxins in the flora and fauna.

Tribes had little legal access to federal sanctions against polluters. Mohawk chiefs governing the Canadian side of the Akwesasne filed a \$150 million suit against Alcoa and Reynolds over fluoride, settling for \$650,000 after legal fees nearly bankrupted the Tribe.

In 1983, the Environmental Protection Agency added the GM site to its superfund cleanup list, estimating that the area contained 800,000 cubic yards of PCB-contaminated sediments. Akwesasne residents were warned to avoid lettuce and tomatoes from their own gardens. Women of childbearing age and children were advised to stop eating the fish, their main source of protein. On the morning that warning was issued in 1985, fishing guide Tony Barnes threw his nets onto the muddy St. Lawrence banks to rot. "We all got sick when we heard it," says Mr. Barnes, who was forced to close his popular fishing camp and eke out a living ferrying environmental investigators on the river.

Frustrated by the cleanup effort's slow pace, some Mohawks sought help from Mr. Stone, the wildlife pathologist, who is known for his tenacious pursuit of polluters. Testing at sites he dubbed Biphenyl Brook and Dead Clam Cove, Mr. Stone found PCBs near the Reynolds plant and determined that the fat of a snapping turtle caught near the GM plant contained 15 times the PCBs needed to qualify as hazardous waste. For the Mohawks, whose legend holds that the earth was created on the back of a turtle, it was like finding poisoned apples in the Garden of Eden.

While acknowledging that their plants are the sources of PCBs, Reynolds, GM and Alcoa contend the pollution stems from disposal procedures dating from days when PCBs were unregulated and not considered hazardous. "We have a lot of additional work to do and we are committed to completing site remediation as soon as possible," says Ronald Thomas, a Reynolds spokesman.

With the tribe's traditional economy in tatters and unemployment near 30%, some Mohawks began smuggling drugs and duty-free cigarettes across the river. Casinos, evolved from bingo halls opened by Mohawk entrepreneurs and other investors in the early 1980s, became Akwesasne's biggest employer. The gaming occasioned violence by Mohawks who saw it as another assault on their way of life. A casino was torched, and roadblocks were built last spring to keep customers away. Pro-gambling forces counterattacked with assault rifles and Molotov cocktails, resulting in two deaths and the closing of the casinos.

A Mohawk leaders cast about for job-generating projects, they were flooded with proposals to turn the reservation into a depository for waste from the outside world's hospitals, sewage plants and industrial incinerators. The Mohawks thus joined a long list of Tribes being courted by suitors ranging from industry mammoths like Browning-Ferris Industries and Waste Management Inc. to smaller operators like PCB Inc., a now defunct Kansas City concern that was among targets of a

1988 congressional investigation into crime in the PCB disposal industry.

Chambers Development Inc., a Pittsburgh waste-disposal firm, acknowledged the benefits of reservation sites in a 1989 letter to an Akwesasne chief. "The regulatory environment has grown increasingly complex and even when technically approved, public hysteria has stopped construction of environmentally sound processing and disposal facilities," the company said. "Because the American Indian has many aspects of self-government over their reservation, they possess an opportunity to bypass the barriers to state of the art waste disposal."

Although Chambers never made a formal proposal, many other companies offered the Mohawks part ownership in their facilities and hundreds of jobs. "Lots of millions of dollars were talked about for all of them," recalls a member of Akwesasne's environmental task force.

Tribal environmentalists who investigated the companies and their complicated proposals uncovered few instances of deception or past law-breaking. Still, they remained troubled. "Why do you want to go to an Indian community?" Chief Ron La-France recalls asking a waste handler after a lavish restaurant meal. "Is there a compassion from your company to save the Indian?"

Among the most persistent suitors was Terry Peterson, whose now defunct Nashua, N.H., firm, United Scientific Associates, proposed in 1988 a complex that would include a high tech gasification plant to burn municipal solid waste, a medical waste incinerator and a huge landfill. "They're sitting on a potential gold mine for themselves up there," Peterson insists.

Tribal leaders were skeptical. They were dubious of the technology and troubled by Mr. Peterson's involvement with a Cambridge, Mass., concern whose similar venture in gasification had failed. They also rejected a proposal for a waste recycling facility presented by Omaha, Neb., businessman Kevin Kean and his partner, a Tennessee waste management firm. Mr. Kean, a former commodities broker, wrote Mohawk leaders that one of his "lifelong dreams has been to help further economic development on Indian reservations." He recently announced that another Tribe, which he wouldn't name, had agreed to permit the building of a combination of a hazardous waste disposal facility, truck stop and casino.

Despite stiffening resistance to landfills and incinerators, some Mohawk leaders still wanted to exploit the outside world's growing environmental awareness.

Last January, the traditional council, made up of representatives from Tribal clans, quietly gave one of its own subchiefs, Edward Gray, permission to build a recycling plant for construction and demolition debris. With a New Hampshire "waste broker" as his consultant, the subchief hired a Massachusetts trucking company to haul debris. The rumble of the first intrusive trucks caused an uproar among Mohawks. Members of the Warriors Society, a well armed Tribal faction, threw up roadblocks to prevent further deliveries.

Testing found that debris already delivered contained low levels of PCBs, the toxins that symbolized Akwesasne problems. The debris caught fire before it could be removed. The Tribe later learned that the

(Continued on page 14.)