

**Cree Nation Land Use Planning
Values, Issues and Vision**

**Report on community input
on land use planning goals**

WEMINDJI

**Compiled by the
Eeyou Planning Commission**

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1. Introduction

After millennia of caring for the land, but being largely excluded from government planning for their homeland, the Crees finally had their right and responsibility to plan for the future of Eeyou Istchee recognized in the 2012 Cree-Quebec Governance Agreement. Shortly afterward the Eeyou Planning Commission was formed, with a representative from each of the 10 Cree communities, to work on land use plans in Eeyou Istchee, ensuring they stay as true as possible to Eeyou Eetuun.

Land use planning for Eeyou Istchee starts with understanding what vision Crees have for their communities, and what issues stand between them and realizing that vision. To this end, in 2017 the Eeyou Planning Commission working with the Cree Nation Government conducted open houses and focus groups in the 10 Cree communities. The goal of this exercise was both to better understand the values, issues and vision that need to be at the core of a Cree land use plan, and to share information about the new land use planning processes in place. This report describes some of how the Crees of Wemindji see their community, the challenges they face, and their vision for the future of their lands.

1.1 History of Cree Land Use Planning

In ancient times as in the present, Crees have always planned their use of the land. Understanding that the well-being of Eeyou Istchee is a pre-condition to the well-being of Crees, and that everything on the land is deserving of respect, Crees considered and planned out their hunting, fishing, trapping, harvesting and travels across the land with the greatest of care.

As the years went by and the presence and activities of non-Crees increased – including not just fur-trading but mining, forestry, hydroelectricity, tourism and more – Crees continued to plan their lives on the land with the same care they always had. But things had changed. Ecosystems transformed by forestry or hydroelectric development did not respond the same way they once did. Mining or even whole new communities displaced traditional hunting spots. The animals behaved differently, responding not just to Crees but to non-Crees whose own occupation of the territory made itself increasingly felt. At the same time, communities became more sedentary and the need for jobs increased. Crees saw opportunities in these new activities and industries occurring on the territory, and in partnerships with the non-Crees with whom they now shared Eeyou Istchee – opportunities to live from and care for the land in new ways, to draw from Cree tradition and ingenuity to meet the needs of a changing world.

In the 2012 Cree-Quebec Agreement on Governance, Crees obtained formal mandates with respect to land use planning – the right and responsibility to compile and share a Cree vision for Eeyou Istchee, shaped by the Elders' teachings that have always informed and guided Cree land use. Basically, land use planning offers Crees the opportunity to do as they have always done, which is to create and implement a plan for how they want to use the land. There are many more activities to consider now than there used to be, and many more people and partners to work

with. But the value Crees place upon balance, that is, upon developing and caring for Eeyou Istchee in a way that ensures that future generations will have as many opportunities to hunt and trap, and work and learn, as possible – that hasn't changed.

1.2 What is the Eeyou Planning Commission about?

As mentioned above, the Eeyou Planning Commission was created as a result of the 2012 Cree-Quebec Governance Agreement. It is composed of a Commissioner from each of the ten Cree communities including Washaw Sibi, as well as a Chair from the Cree Nation Government – currently the Deputy Grand Chief. The Wemindji representative to the Eeyou Planning Commission is:

- Elmer Georgekish, Commissioner

The mandate of the Eeyou Planning Commission is to work towards building a collective Cree vision and the capacity to engage on land use planning related activities throughout all of Eeyou Istchee. The EPC will work collaboratively with regional planning partners in order to harmonize the various land use plans so that they work as best as possible with the collective vision, interests and aspirations of the Crees. This mandate includes:

- The drafting of a land use plan (Regional Land and Resource Use Plan) for Category II lands
- Collaborating with the EIJBRG in harmonizing Category II and III land use plans, and providing Cree content and information for Category III plans
- Collaborating with the Eeyou Marine Region Planning Commission in harmonizing terrestrial and offshore land use planning and implementation
- Any other responsibilities the Cree Nation Government assigns to it.

1.3 How does land use planning work?



There are seven main stages for land use planning in Eeyou Istchee.

The first is determining what the main goals of a Cree land use plan need to be (1. Pre-planning, goal setting). The Values, Issues and Vision we hear about in Wemindji and other Cree communities will help us understand and describe those goals. Each community will have its own unique goals, and still others will be common across many or all Cree communities.

Once these goals are established, the Eeyou Planning Commission and the Cree Nation Government will collect the background information related to these goals (2. Research, data collection).

Next, the Eeyou Planning Commission and the Cree Nation Government return to communities to ensure that the information they collected is accurate (3. Analysis, validation).

Using the information collected, the Eeyou Planning Commission and the Cree Nation Government will work with communities, planning partners and others on developing land use plans that move Crees closer to the goals they have named (4. Writing the plans).

These plans then need to be approved in public hearings held in the Cree communities (5. Public hearings, plan approval).

After this they are put into action (6. Implementation) and finally, once in action, they are assessed to check whether they are successfully helping to reach the goals established by Crees (7. Evaluation, monitoring).

Here is an example of what the land use planning process looks like using the goal of protecting culturally sensitive sites:

Stage of Planning	Work Involved
1. Pre-planning, goal setting	Protect culturally sensitive sites
2. Research, data collection	Collect information from Elders and land users on where culturally sensitive sites are. Determine which, if any, are already protected.
3. Analysis, validation	Validate information on culturally sensitive sites with the communities, to make sure we know where many or all of them are.
4. Writing the plans	Develop plan for land use that gives a special status to valued culturally sensitive sites.
5. Public hearings, plan approval	Present plan to communities for approval, ensure it meets the goal they envisioned
6. Implementation	Put plan into action
7. Evaluation, monitoring.	Check to see if the culturally sensitive sites are being protected as envisioned by the community

1.4 On the Values Issue Vision Exercise

In order to understand more about Wemindji, and what issues and objectives matter most to Wemndji Crees, the Wemindji Commissioner for the Eeyou Planning Commission (EPC) worked with the EPC Secretariat to hold focus groups with community members. The objective of these focus groups was to gain a better understanding of what is valued by community members, what issues they see in relation to land use planning, and what is their vision for the future of their community. Different groups were targeted for input, including local government employees whose mandates touch land use planning (e.g. those who work in Environment, Economic Development, Cultural Development, etc.), as well as representatives of different demographic groups: women, Elders, youth, and land users. Members of these groups were invited to participate in focus groups, and the composition of these groups was mixed and determined mainly by the availability of participants. Several focus groups were held over three days in Wemindji.

In addition to the focus groups, the Commissioners and the Cree Nation Government held an Open House in Wemindji on June 14th 2017. At the Open House, community members had the

opportunity to hear a presentation on land use planning, pick up pamphlets and information, and ask questions of the Commissioner and Cree Nation Government representatives. They also had the opportunity to give their own feedback on the values, issues and vision that matter most to them in relation to land use planning.

Comments and perspectives from participants were grouped into a table and then sorted by theme pertaining to values, issues and vision, these themes being described below. Participants are described as Wemindji Crees or Wemindji community members in the text, but as only a limited number of community members participated in the exercise, it should be understood that the views they describe and the themes discussed here are indicative of broader public opinion in Wemindji but not a definitive take on it. This document and the land use planning goals that emerge from it will continue to evolve along with the development of and dialogue within the community.

2. What is Valued

When asked about what makes Wemindji and surrounding community lands unique and special, Wemindji Crees speak of beauty and character of the community and their ability and commitment to balance development with respect of the environment and the continuity of a vibrant Cree culture.

Wemindji Crees highlight what some refer to as their seven core values: Courage, Humility, Respect, Sharing, Wisdom, Compassion and Honesty, adding that they pride themselves in their integrity, transparency and competence.

When asked about what are the most important elements to keep in mind when making decision about what happens on the land, the following elements are commonly discussed.

2.1 Hunting and being on the land

It is clear from discussions with Wemindji Crees that it is important that decisions about what happens on the land and in the community allows hunting, as well as fishing and trapping, and also just being on the land in general.

“Hunting is the most important to us, being on the land. Gathering and harvesting of fish at camps, sturgeon, whitefish. Out in the Bay and on the coast. Preserving meat, goose, fish in barrel by salting. We used to have dog teams to help us hunt.”

“Sharing geese and other traditional meet still happens in the community. This should be promoted even more.”

2.2 Cree hunting skills and knowledge

The ability to pursue these activities requires an ability to pass on the knowledge and skills necessary to live on the land in a way that is safe and sustainable.

“It is important to keep sharing knowledge about the land. There are dangerous spots, and a lot of youth don’t know much about where to go on the land...Like what to do if I get lost, it’s important we can teach that to the youth.”

“It is important to teach the youth about gun safety, the proper time of hunting geese, care on handling firearm in the blind. Teach them how to shoot at an early age. Young men still went on the hunt even though they didn't necessarily have a gun. Kids nowadays, are too young to shoot firearms, twelve years old was the usual age to begin shooting firearms. To learn by observing and also coaching from experienced hunters.”

2.3 Access to a healthy environment

Living on the land requires that the environment be healthy. This calls for protection from pollution, flooding, mining and similar transformation.

“People need to value and preserve the land in order to have future generations be able to practice hunting and other cultural activities on the land. For the land to support these activities it needs to be in a good state.”

“Need more protected areas, and regulations must be respected. We need to sustain and protect wildlife. That language is our language, our culture.”

2.4 Respect of the animals

Respect of the animals is one of the most important values to Wemindji Crees. It is essential to ensure access to a healthy environment and to live on the land. Respect of the animals should guide decision making about land use, and it is a value to be kept.

“We need to teach our youth again, to not kill too much, need to respect land, animals. For example, fireworks might disturb the animals, so we make sure to not use them. We must take care to ensure that fire ashes are not thrown into the water because fish are sensitive to them.”

2.5 Protection of water

Protecting the environment calls for specific attention to freshwater sources: lakes, rivers, springs. Any projects considered should be evaluated regarding their potential impacts on these streams, both for pollution, diversion, flooding.

“Water is the most important thing, and care must be taken to not spoil it, to protect it wherever there is development.”

2.6 Facing development while respecting the land

An important dimension of Wemindji Crees commitment to respecting the environment is that they do not consider this as an anti-development position, but rather than development can and should fall within the framework of established Cree values and practices when it comes to the land.

“The land provides us a great deal of opportunity. It's a very sacred thing. We are always looked at as protectors. But we can't stop development. We always need to adapt to change. Elders say they can't go back to the past, they would starve, there is not enough for us to go around.”

“We are looking for a balance when thinking about development: We need to keep land in good shape and we are open to new investments. The Paix des Braves enabled a type of balanced development for forestry.”

“One thing that sets Wemindji apart is its openness to how we can develop as a community, and how we manage to get the wealth and our project to foster unity. Wealth created a sense of unity . The decisions made to have a mini power plant in Wemindji brought unity.”

2.7 Inclusive governance

Wemindji Crees consider that one of the strength of their community, and of the Cree nation as a whole, has been their ability to seek and consider everyone’s input when making decision about projects. This inclusive approach to governance is an important value that should guide Cree Nation land use planning.

“Getting everybody’s views when making decisions, listen to their concerns, identify the trade offs in order to move forward with development projects to make sure it is done in a good way.”

2.8 The historical roots of Wemindji

Established in 1959, Wemindji itself is a fairly young community, but its roots go back a lot further back in time. Maintaining and acknowledging these historical roots, the legacy of its past at Old Factory and elsewhere on the land, is an important value of Wemindji Crees.

“One thing that is important is the Old Factory visit, the gathering at the old settlement, and our effort to preserve and hold on our Cree culture. This coming July

(2017), we are celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of this visit. Continuous funding is provided each year so this continues into the future.”

2.9 A clean and welcoming community

The overall cleanliness and beauty of Wemindji are an element of pride for Wemindji Crees. Commitment to maintain, and even further enhance, these attributes should be at the basis of local land use planning initiatives.

“The pavement of the streets and the lawns have added to the quality the environment. Landscaping, the paving of the streets has made the community much less dusty. Before that we had problems with asthma. Our recycling stands out from other communities. This is instilled in young people at a very young age.”

“Everybody in the community helps in keeping the community clean. A community cleanup is organized throughout the community and a lot of people participate.”

“Back then there was no planning. Now we started planning for the future of Wemindji. We pride ourselves in our integrity, transparency, competence.”

3. Issues that Wemindji faces

Most of the issues discussed pertain to monitoring and control of industrial development projects and their environmental impacts. Another prominent topic is the perception that monitoring and overview of hunting and fishing is becoming or has become inadequate to face harvesting pressure.

3.1 Inadequate monitoring of mineral exploration activities

There is a general sense that the proliferation of mineral exploration activities since the mid-2000s has outpaced the regional ability to keep track of the cumulative environmental impacts of this activity.

“Prospecting and drilling are taking place all over Eeyou Istchee and their locations are not properly documented. Contaminants could negatively affect water sources. How about all the water sources, small lakes, streams that flow into Maquatua River estuary?”

“Prospecting is a problem. We need to be informed about the activities that are going on regarding prospecting”.

3.2 Projects happening while undergoing environmental review

Some report that construction related to development projects undergoing environmental review take place before the conclusion of these reviews. This is important because it undermines the credibility of the review process, which in the past has played a key role in ensuring that Cree rights and wishes are respected.

“During the environment impact review study, the road is already being built. There is a problem of projects being built while they are still under review.”

3.3 Shortcomings in the consultation process about developments

Related to the previous point is the issue that consultations for development projects are at times inadequate. Wemindji Crees have come under the impression that promoters do not provide all the necessary information, or that Cree inputs are insufficiently considered.

“Whenever consultations are happening it seems that it’s done repeatedly without proper consideration to reach as many people it should.”

“Omission of certain sometimes important details for large projects in Wemindji-- which lead to rushed decision-making. This is not the Cree way of deciding. All the details of mega projects should be provided to our people beforehand.”

“The decisions of the Cree peoples with respect to mega projects are not respected, the developers go ahead anyways. Cree management of the land is not recognized.”

3.4 Construction contracts in category 3 lands

An element of Wemindji Crees’ commitment to balancing environmental protection and development is their interest in becoming more involved in development projects. One obstacle they see on this point is the competition they face from non-Crees from the South: these companies may have greater access to capital and accredited workers. From a Wemindji point of view, the hiring of non-Cree companies for work in the area is seen as less likely to contribute to the economic advancement of the region.

“One issue is the way contracts are awarded. For example, it’s especially very difficult for us to get contracts from Hydro-Quebec. In category 3, there is a lot of competition from southern companies. Companies want to make profits and they are only in place for a short time. We want to develop our people, we stay here.”

3.5 Over-fishing and over-hunting

There are concerns about over-harvesting of fish and wildlife by community members. This is linked to a perceived “breakdown” in the customary monitoring practices of wildlife management in Cree territory.

The very large amount of fish taken out during fishing derbies has been identified as especially problematic.

“Over-harvesting is an important issue. Fishing at Lake Yasinski for example. The fishing derby. The sale of fish does not sit right with the people.”

“The fishing derbies organized by the community are an important issue, the quantity of fish taken is very high. There should be limits on how much is fished.”

“People are scooping walleye right off the highway, in spawning areas.”

3.6 The need to bring back the tradition of “resting” the animals so they can replenish

Related to over-harvesting and inadequate monitoring of hunting and fishing is the observation that customary practices meant to help wildlife thrive, such as letting part of the land and animal populations rest and replenish before hunting, trapping or fishing, are not sufficiently practiced and should be brought back.

“Elders speak about the goose hunt out on the bay. Before there was a day to start goose hunting. This tradition is not respected now. People start hunting when they want to. There is a day when the goose hunt closes in Wemindji. We should bring this tradition back to enable the geese to regenerate. Let them fatten up. Same with other animals.”

3.7 Issues with non-Cree hunters and improper hunting handling of kills

As in other communities, Wemindji Crees have expressed concerns about the activities of non-Cree hunters. This concerns especially sport hunters who come to hunt caribou in the region with insufficient awareness and consideration of Cree customs and ethos of respect for the animals.

“With sport hunters and caribou, currently we see abuse, so we need to address this in the future with stricter regulations, sections. Even other big games, people dispose of some parts improperly. We must look at the possibility of sport hunters adopting the Cree ways of using all parts of game.”

3.8 Issues concerning allocation and landscaping of housing lots

Lastly, there is an item that appears more unique to Wemindji but that was brought up a few times: the constraints on housing lots building due to the rocky grounds of Wemindji. This presents challenges to the expansion of the housing stock, which combines with a perception that the housing allocation procedure could be improved for greater equity and fairness.

“With the housing program, the size of the lots will need to be comprehensively managed. People who own houses can have bigger lots and yards than people in social housing.”

“There are lots of hills around Wemindji, so lots of bedrock blast need to be done in order to build buildings. House owners have smaller lots because of complicated blasting of bedrock.”

4. Elements of a Wemindji vision for the future

Wemindji Crees vision for the future of their community and Cree Nation lands includes better provision to oversee and control harvesting activities, amenities to facilitate the continuity of culture and language. Community members also brought up the importance of unity and collaboration between the communities of Eeyou Istchee, proactive – rather than reactive – governance and economic diversification

4.1 Closely monitored and controlled hunting and fishing

The reported issue of over-harvesting, poaching, and the observed disregard for the respect of the animals and the tallymen’s requests made some call for stronger provisions to manage hunting and fishing in the region.

“To protect the land we need conservation officers that will issue permits to hunters in order to control harvest.”

4.2 Continuity of Cree culture and language

The vision that Wemindji Crees have for the future of their community is one where Eeyou language and culture continue to thrive, and they want amenities and programs to help make that vision materialize.

“We would like to have a cultural camp for land based programs linked to culture, to do things close to the road, on the islands and in different places.”

“We want kids to still speak Cree in twenty years from now.”

4.3 Unity and collaboration across the Cree communities and with other entities

Political, economic and cultural strength in Eeyou Istchee are seen as hinging on all the communities' ability to work together, share resources and establish partnerships.

“Competition between the communities for economic development does not maximize wealth production in the entire Cree Nation, nor does it help arrive at the best use of the land. Some communities they have problems with developing human resources, competencies. So a goal would be that individual communities cooperate, work together to benefit the Cree Nation as a whole.”

“Partnership between Cree communities can work. For example, Kepa transport is a partnership between Wemindji and Chisasibi. It has been in business for 35 years. Ten percent of its revenue come from businesses in the Cree nation, 90% from other businesses in the south. Same with Petro-Nord, we partnered with Chisasibi to go ahead with this project.”

4.4 Proactive Cree-led development

Cree development and governance initiatives have historically often been in response to impositions from outside. Wemindji Crees hope that their community and its counterparts across Eeyou Istchee will be able to put forward and act on their own vision.

“The Plan Nord affects Cree land, we have to be more proactive than ever. The Plan Nord, we should taking full ownership of that. Working in collaboration with the Quebec. Government to make sure that our vision guides this development.”

“To create of jobs though development is a longer term vision. We want to be ‘masters of our destiny’: that the Crees be the owners of development companies, for example, hydroelectric exploitation. Any future hydro-power generated from Eeyou Istchee should contribute meeting the needs of the Cree.”

4.5 Economic diversification

Part of this vision entails economic diversification: to be durable, Cree-led economic development needs to be based on more than resource extraction but also retail, possibly manufacturing and other services.

“We need to sell products, not just be users. This is the way it has been in the past, it needs to start changing now. Kepa trucks go down empty. We would like to manufacture our own products, to have value added. We are interested in renewable energy, but it's difficult for us to be competitive in that sector. Mining, part

ownership in future mine development. Transportation, especially sea transport via barge has a lot of potential, for example.”

“Where will the money come from after the mine? Alternative development opportunities should be explored so that after the mining activity is finished we have other opportunities for economic development. Forestry and tree plantations could be a viable new opportunity. Planting trees. We have lots of projects like greenhouse, recycling, blueberries and cranberries harvesting, eco-tourism.”

4.6 Eco-tourism to balance culture, environment and development

An area of economic development that has been identified as particularly promising is eco-tourism.

“Tourism would be a good vehicle to help preserve the traditions, culture and lifestyle of the Cree Nation.”

5 Conclusion

The values, issues and vision described by Wemindji Crees focused on a handful of main topics. These topics and related descriptions, as seen below, broadly describe some of the main goals and considerations for a Wemindji land use planning process:

Topics	Description
Harvesting	Prevent over-hunting, trapping and fishing through deployment of Cree conservation officers
Cree culture and language	Improve and increase programs, facilities etc. that will help ensure full transmission of Cree culture and language to future generations
Collaboration with other Cree communities	Create more collaborations with other Cree communities to provide coordination required for all communities to benefit from business and development
Being pro-active	Create and push a Cree vision for the territory ahead of the interventions associated with Plan Nord, Quebec government, Hydro-Quebec and other proponents, etc.
Cree economic development	Explore different development opportunities and strategies (eco-tourism, pushing into the category 3 contract market, renewable energy) to put Crees at forefront of development in the territory
Mining	Better regulate mining exploration activities and their impacts

Non-Cree hunting	Try to better control sports hunters activities, ensuring that they respect Cree rights, values and activities on the land
Environmental review process	Ensure that process is complete and authorization is delivered before projects go ahead
Consultation	Improve communication and consultation with community members, to ensure they are fully informed and better integrated into decision-making, while avoiding needless duplication
Governance	Strive for inclusive governance that involves public participation and discussions as a good approach to addressing development projects