

VOICE OF THE PEOPLE ON THE RE-LOCATION ISSUE

KASHECHEWAN FIRST NATION, ONTARIO, CANADA

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Abstract: When a federal government report recommended that the community of Kashechewan First Nation be relocated to Timmins Ontario, the community leadership decided to conduct its own community consultations. Direct and meaningful input from the community was the focus of this community-based initiative involving all age groups. This participatory research project was headed and conducted by Cree people who worked as a team to ensure that all community members had the opportunity to become involved in expressing their thoughts and aspirations for their traditional lands. The results strongly indicate the deep connection that the people have for their ancestral homelands. The community-driven endeavour reflects the determination and conviction of the people to protect their homelands as it is their sacred responsibility. Although there has been no movement on the side of the federal government, this community-driven process has been an empowering experience for the people.

Keywords: Flood, evacuation, community relocation, community consultation, First Nation, Kashechewan, northern Ontario, ancestral homeland, connection to the land.

I. INTRODUCTION

Kashechewan is a Cree community located in northern Ontario. It is located along the Albany River about 10 kilometres from the James Bay. There are about 1500 people living on the reserve, but the population fluctuates up to about 1900 people; the number of people living in the community depends on the movements of the people at various times of the year. A large number of people leave the community temporarily for education, employment and housing purposes.

The community members of Kashechewan have been evacuated several times in the past due to unsafe drinking water, flooding and deplorable living conditions. The community lies on low land in the flood plain area of the Albany River

In 2006, the federal government appointed Allan Pope, a former Member of Parliament, as *Special Federal Representative* charged with responsibility to develop a sustainable solution for the community of Kashechewan. He was asked to conduct a study and to make recommendations as to what should be done about the problems faced by the community. The document, titled *Report on the Kashechewan First Nation and its People*, includes 51 recommendations which cover a wide range of issues affecting the community. Many of these recommendations confirm the needs of the community; the areas that relate to the issues discussed in the community consultation process conducted following the submission of Pope's report will be discussed in subsequent sections of this article. Pope (2006) also recommended that the community be relocated to the outskirts of Timmins Ontario, which is the nearest urban centre about 400 kilometres to the south. Chief Jonathan Solomon announced that he would take this recommendation back to the people to decide on the relocation issue. The current article describes the feedback provided directly from the people of the community.

Purpose of the consultation process

For many generations, ever since the Europeans came to the Cree homelands, it has been outsiders who have made major decisions that affect the lives of the people (Figure 1). Those decisions, in most cases, have negatively impacted on the Cree people. The community consultation was designed to enable the

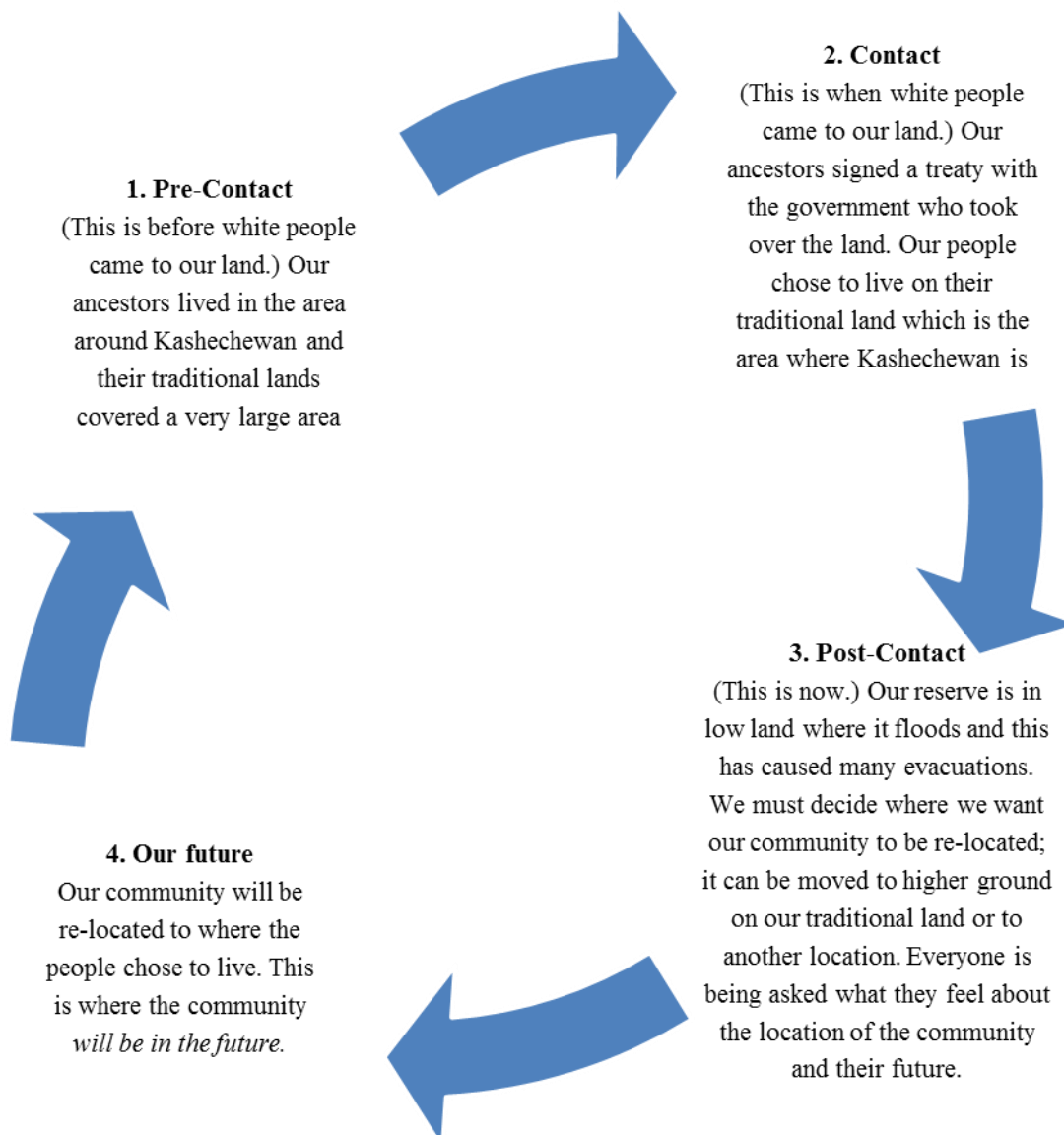
people of Kashechewan to make decisions about their own community. They are the ones who live in the community, the ones whose children, grandchildren and future generations will be impacted by decisions about the future of the community. The community must speak for itself; outsiders cannot decide what is best for the community nor can they determine the destiny of a people.

The government has fiduciary obligations to First Nations people; Indigenous ancestors had signed a

treaty with the government on a nation-to-nation basis, and the community of Kashechewan must be recognized as a First Nation which has a right to decide on its own destiny.

The community consultation process was focused on the community LOCATION issue. The emphasis of the consultation process was to allow the community members themselves to decide upon their own destiny and to express what they want for their future.

Figure 1. The Historical Journey of Kashechewan People and their Homelands



This consultation process allowed all community members the opportunity to speak up and to express their aspirations for their community. Several questions were considered in the consultation process: (1) What do they think should be done? (2) Where do they want to live? (3) How do they feel about their connection to their homelands? (4) What do they want for their children and future generations? These are the primary questions that they were asked. The consultation was conducted in a manner that would allow the community members to be free to express their views and opinions.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Community-based methodology

All community members were provided with ample opportunity to have input into this consultation process. The main target groups were elders, men, women, youth, and off-reserve Kashechewan First Nation members. Community members who were 12 years of age and older were involved in the community study.

All members of the research team were Cree people; the team was headed by a Cree scholar with extensive experience in the community of Kashechewan. Community-based workers, who live in Kashechewan and who are fluent Cree speakers, were also retained for this consultation process. They were trained in the process of interviewing and questionnaire distribution and data collection. A Steering Committee provided guidance and direction to the consultation process throughout its duration. The committee consisted of community members who included the community leaders, elders, women and youth.

The consultation process was focused solely on the views and aspirations of the people of Kashechewan First Nation. This type of participatory-based qualitative research offers flexibility, holistic examination of issues and involves direct and active involvement of the people. The interviewers had personal contact with the participants who had the freedom to voice their opinions; open ended questions allowed them to express themselves freely. Qualitative research provides opportunities to learn, gain awareness, and assist in finding solutions that embrace meaningful involvement of the participants. Qualitative research is participant-based, it is the participants who have control over the research and who come up with solutions to the issues being examined. In this community consultation process, the researchers were all native to the area; they developed rapport and trust with the participants who were comfortable in sharing their views and aspirations. In summary, qualitative participatory research is compatible with Indigenous cul-

ture; it provides a method of opening communications with the people and is congruent with the way everyday life is carried out in First Nations communities.

The consultation process was community driven. The participants expressed their appreciation with the way the consultation was carried out. One said: "... this is how we used to solve problems in the past; people would be asked how they feel, and it was not only adults but the children as well" (76 year old woman). The people were comfortable with the process and took time to participate in the study; another stated that "having our own Native people do the work is very good to see" (15 year old girl). A youth explained: "I feel really good because I was allowed to be part of this survey and also part of the youth focus group meeting" (17 year old boy).

Community members had extensive input into the consultation process through various methods: these included a survey, individual interviews, group interviews, and focus groups. Individual interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis; the participants were informed that all information was confidential. Group interviews were held with families in their homes, and focus groups were held with target groups, namely elders, women, men and youth. Questionnaires were completed by some individuals individually and they were placed in envelopes to be accessed only by the facilitator. The questions posed in this process were open-ended; participants were not limited to certain choices. The participants had full reign over what they wanted to say and there were no influences on how they answered the questions.

B. Questions asked

1. Where do you want the community of Kashechewan to be located? (Where do you want to live?)
2. What are your reasons for your choice? (Why did you choose this location?)
3. Do you feel that it is important to stay connected with our traditional land?
4. What would you like to see in the new community? What things or changes do you want in the new community?

III. RESULTS

A. Participation rates

The rate of participation in the consultation process was outstanding. A vast majority (863 out of potential 1000 or 86%) of the community members over age 11 were involved in the process. A majority of the participants (754 out of 863 or 87%) were people living on the reserve at the time of this study. The off-reserve members (109) were those who were working

in urban centres or attending secondary and post-secondary schools in the south.

B. Age groups

The majority of the participants (51%) were in the age group of 12 to 29 years of age (443 of 863). Well over a third (177 or 40%) of the youth in the 12 to 29 age group were between 12 to 18 years of age. The next highest age group (36%) were those aged 30 to 50 years old (310 of 863). A smaller proportion, 82 (10%) were in the 51 to 70 age category, while 28 (3%) were 70 years of age and over.

The proportional divisions of the participants' age groups are representative of the proportion of age groups in the community as a whole. About half of the population is under 30 years of age. Those aged 30 years and over represent the other half of the community's population.

C. Community consultation results

The results of the community consultation process are based entirely on the people's input through the survey and interviewing process. Categories were created out of the community-based data from the open-ended survey. Four traditional homeland specific locations were identified.

- *Site 5* is approximately 30 kilometres from the current Kashechewan site. People identified as choosing Site 5 specifically stated that they preferred it.
- *Upriver* denotes a choice that in general refers to higher ground levels; some of these people chose Site 5 but not specifically.
- *Within reserve boundary* refers to a choice by people who want to move to higher ground as long as it is within the reserve boundary.
- *Current Kashechewan site* is the choice of people who prefer to stay in the current location.

As noted above, 863 completed questionnaires were received. In regards to their choice of community location, 46 people (5%) chose southern urban centres, while 817 (95%) people chose their traditional homelands.

Of the 817 who chose the traditional homeland, specific locations are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Preferred site for all age groups (N=817)

	<i>N</i>	%
Site 5	334	41
Upriver	211	26
Reserve Boundary	116	14
Kashechewan site	156	19

Thus, 707 (82%) people wanted to move out of the current Kashechewan site (46 of the 707 chose urban centres), and 156 (18%) people want to stay in current Kashechewan site. Of 817 people who wanted to stay on their traditional territory, 334 (41%) specifically identified Site 5, while 211 (26%) indicated a desire to move "up river", some of whom chose Site 5 but did not specify it as such. About a sixth, 116 (14%), stated that it was important to move the community within the reserve boundary, while 156 (18%) chose to stay in the community's current site.

D. What are the choices of each age group?

The results by age groups are presented in Tables 2 to 6. Except for those more than seventy years of age, Site 5 was the first choice of all age groups. The proportion selecting this site ranged from a low of 37% to a high of 44%. The more southerly site was consistently ranked the lowest by all age groups.

Table 2. Age group 12-29 years (N=443)

	<i>N</i>	%
Site 5	163	37
Upriver	98	22
Reserve Boundary	81	18
Kashechewan site	78	18
South	23	5

Nearly all (95%) of the youth wanted to stay on their traditional homelands; only a few (5%) wanted to move to a southern urban centre.

The youth category was broken down further to explore the views of the very young people on the issue of relocation. The total number of participants aged 12 to 18 years is 177. Table 3 shows the results for this age group.

Table 3. Age group 12-18 years (N=177)

	<i>N</i>	%
Site 5	70	39
Upriver	24	14
Reserve Boundary	32	18
Kashechewan site	39	22
South	12	7

The results show that 93% of the youngest age group chose to stay on their traditional land, while 7% want to move south.

Table 4. Age group 30-50 years: (N=310)

	<i>N</i>	%
Site 5	135	44
Upriver	83	27
Reserve Boundary	26	8
Kashechewan site	45	14
South	21	7

Among those between age 30 and 50, 93% wanted to stay on their traditional territories, while 21 (%) wanted to move south.

Table 5. Age group 51-70 years (N=82)

	<i>N</i>	%
Site 5	34	42
Upriver	24	29
Reserve Boundary	5	6
Kashechewan site	17	21
South	2	2

Virtually all of those who were between 51 to 70 years of age (98%) wanted to stay in their traditional homelands. Only 2% wanted to move to an urban centre.

Table 6. Age group 70+: (N=28)

	<i>N</i>	%
Site 5	2	7
Upriver	6	21
Reserve Boundary	4	14
Kashechewan site	16	57
South	0	0

All (100 %) people aged 70 years and older wanted to stay on their traditional homelands. No one in this age group wanted to move to an urban centre.

IV. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

A. New life and a better community

Those people who wanted to move to another community site saw the potential for a new life and a better community, specifically a better future for the children. Participants stated: "It will be best for the children. Participants stated: "It will be best for the young people and the children will have hope for the future (56 year old woman)/ It will be a "new beginning for our children and the next generation" (44 year old woman). People said they wanted "to see the children happy" (40 year old man); at the same time it was believed that they can maintain their tra-

ditional way of life. It was pointed out that there was more hunting potential up river, and that there were more fish, more wood and cleaner water.

Planning for the future was seen as an essential task "to meet needs of community members not just the present but also those in the future" (31 year old woman). People felt that they would have an opportunity to plan and build a new community with all that they needed such as new homes, a recreation centre, and hospital. Careful planning was important in order to design the community with a whole new infrastructure, better roads, streetlights, and new buildings. It was also noted that the new community could be redesigned with a better waste management system and water treatment plant. It was commented that "everything will be new" (53 year old woman).

Participants viewed a new community site as offering a cleaner environment "to have a better life and healthier environment" and a "safer place for our children, grandchildren and generations to come" (52 year old woman). Many people stated that they wanted to be in a flood-free area, and that there have been too many evacuations. It was commented by a participant: "I am tired of the evacuations" (54 year old woman). People in general felt that the current community of Kashechewan was "too contaminated". The dyke around the community was seen as obstruction; people complained that they could not see the river and people feel that they are in "a nest". It was also felt that this type of "living in a bowl" had adverse impacts on the feeling of well-being amongst community members.

"To start a new life in a clean new environment for the children" (70 year old man) also meant making positive changes, not only to the physical set-up of the community, but also the general advancement of the people in various areas. One comment was that "we can move on to another life, a better life" (42 year old woman). People said that their community needed a lot of improvement. Some of the areas identified were education, health, recreation, policing and social issues.

Many people identified education as an area in need of improvement. They saw the community move as "our opportunity to set up a better school system, higher standards of education" (38 year old man). They believed that improved local education would lead to more success at higher levels of education. They reported that the problems with sewer system, water system and floods had caused the children to miss a lot of school. A parent commented that "they [children] have lost a lot of education" (34 year old woman). It was also felt that, with the move, better health services should be implemented so that early

diagnosis of various diseases such as diabetes and cancer can be made which can save lives. People also felt that recreation, especially for youth, should be incorporated into the community planning as well as a focus on positive self-development and the well-being of the youth. It was pointed out that the move could lead to positive changes by establishing new rules on social issues such as alcohol and drug abuse, family violence, and vandalism. It was also seen as a strategy for addressing the alarming suicide crisis.

People believed that there would be economic benefits if the community moved to a better land site. It was noted that there would be “more resource development opportunities up river” (18 year old woman) and that the community can secure its ownership of the land by being involved in future resource developments. More opportunities for employment, training and business development were also seen as a vital part of planning the new community. People felt that, if they were up river, an all-season road could be explored so that the high cost of food, clothing and other necessities could be decreased. It was also pointed out that the move was “our big chance to set up our own community store, so that our money stops flowing out of our community” (42 year old man).

B. Safety

In general, the participants strongly felt that moving the community to a higher area is vital for the safety of the community members. People expressed that “our people should no longer live in fear” (45 year old woman) and that the move would be “for the safety of my people” (18 year old woman), and “to a safer place for my children” (24 year old man). Others said that if the community moves, “we won’t have to worry about flooding every spring” (70 year old woman) and that “it will be safe during ice breakup in the spring” (23 year old woman). People said that the safety of their children and grandchildren was of utmost importance; they stated that move was for the “safety for my family and the future generations” and they chose to move “because of my grandchildren so they don’t have to worry about flooding” (66 year old man). A participant summed up the situation by saying: “I don’t trust the dyke” (41 year old man).

The danger in which the people lived was understood to be unacceptable; the issue was central to their basic human right to live in a safe place. It was commented that the people of Kashechewan “need to be recognized as humans that care for and love each other” (73 year old woman). People believe that the events that had taken place, such as evacuations, unsafe water and flooding all point to the fact that they must move to a safer place. Living in such uncertainty has

detrimental effects on the holistic well-being of the people; they never feel secure because flooding is imminent. People state that it is “too dangerous to stay here during spring breakup” (42 year old man). It was further noted that “Our community has been through too many evacuations. I am tired of living with instability. Too many times we have to leave, not knowing what we are going to come home to” (30 year old woman).

People articulated that living in a bowl was very depressing, and that the “dyke is bad for mental health” (49 year old man). It was stated that, if the community moved, there would be “no more dyke to block the beautiful view of nature” (32 year old man) and that “It will be good to live in a good healthy environment” (58 year old man). One concluded that the people would “have a new beginning on a better land” (42 year old woman).

Other issues raised by participants pertained to the possibility of a hydro dam up the river. In addition, the general issue of global warming was raised as a concern. People said that if dams and global warming cause the melting of ice, the river may rise even higher. For this reason, people felt that the community definitely needed to move to higher ground.

People felt that the move would bring security and stability to the people. It would create safety from flooding and contamination, safe drinking water, no more e-coli, and that “the community deserves a new beginning after years of uncertainty and constant threats of flooding and water contamination” (50 year old woman).

C. For our children—The future

Preparing a better world for their children was foundational as to why people wanted to move to a safer and more secure environment. It was affirmed: “we are people of the land and we must protect it for the next generation and more generations to come in the future” (52 year old man).

The language and culture was of paramount importance to the people who proudly spoke of their Cree language as their first language and main means of communication in the community. Language was the transmitter of culture; “without language our people will lose their identity” (44 year old woman). Further comments reinforced the importance of the language, “to maintain our strong Cree language, we must continue to teach our children their own language” (32 year old man).

Teaching the culture to the children was important, and a core part of the culture is the connection to the land. People felt that youth remain connected to the land. It was expressed that “it is so important for the

youth to stay close to their ancestral homelands, this includes our children, grandchildren and great grandchildren” (71 year old woman). The people saw their identity as being part of the land and it was affirmed that “our identity is tied to the land” (55 year old man) and that “it is important for children to have that connection to the land at an early age” (35 year old woman). Even in today’s world, children are still being taught how to live off the land and they are taught traditional ways of their ancestors. It was also expressed that, when the move is made to the new site, that traditional knowledge and skills should be focused upon, not only by parents but by the schools to ensure that the connection to the land and to the Creator continues on to future generations.

The youth were viewed as the group that would take the Kashechewan people closer to self-determination when it was declared that “It is our younger generations that will lead our people to become stronger...” (56 year old woman). It was clearly believed that the land must be held for the future generation; it was expressed as “for security of our children and their future... it will be good for the next generation” (62 year old man). It was concluded that “we must keep our land for many generations to come” (72 year old woman).

D. Traditional life

Living off the land has been part of the culture since time immemorial. It was strongly stated that this traditional lifestyle would be carried on from generation to generation. Families endorsed this; most parents said they still take their children out on the land “we need to understand, preserve and protect what was given to us in the beginning of time. Our elders and the old people always kept these laws, the laws to exercise and practice our way of life on the land” (75 year old woman). However, with all the evacuations, respondents reported that traditional activities such as hunting, trapping, camping and fishing had been drastically disrupted and this had caused upheaval and uncertainty. Most people still live and practice their traditional survival skills off the land. Parents stated: “we still teach our children how to live off the land” (41 year old couple). The people of Kashechewan continue the traditions of their ancestors, even in today’s world. It was noted that “if we did not have our wild food, we would not be able to survive just on store bought food” (57 year old woman). A father said: “I have been a hunter all my life”; he added that “I want my children to continue to survive off the land as it is what we were given to live” (50 year old man). People believed that teaching their children how to live in harmony with the land was important because “it is part of our family cultural life” (38 year old man).

“It is important to connect with our cultural identity” (29 year old man). The core of their identity is tied to their ancestors as it was expressed: “it is important to preserve our way of life, it is where our grandfathers lived before us, now it is our turn to practice and move along to still survive off the land... my grandfathers are buried in the traditional land” (50 year-old woman). “Our trapping areas are on and off the reserve land” (62 year old woman) and that all families know where their ancestral land areas are.

“Keeping connection to our traditional land is part of our culture” (38 year old woman); this was a major theme among the people. They affirmed that their traditional territory goes far beyond the reserve boundaries, and “the local families all know where their traditional areas are” (36 year old man). It was expressed that “it is very important to stay connected with the land... it is where our old people came from; they roamed the land long before the white people came. They survived, trapped, fished and hunted on the land for many years. Today we still continue to carry on what they taught us and this is why we have to carry on our traditions and we need to stay connected with the land” (41 year old man).

People expressed that being out on the land is healthy for them; it was noted that “staying on the land keeps us healthy” (40 year old man). “The food that they got from the land was seen as a core part of their lives. The land was given to us as a gift to survive... if we don’t practice what was given, then one day we will lose it” (62 year old woman). From living off the land, they not only got physical exercise but also their emotional and spiritual needs were met. It was commented: “I love and appreciate the traditional food that we eat” (57 year old woman), and “we need our traditional food, if we did not have it we would not be able to survive with the high cost of food in the store” (82 year old woman). It was again confirmed that teaching the youth is an essential task if the culture is to survive. People said that they want “to teach our children the traditional ways” (33 year old man). Another commented that “I want my grandchildren to know the traditional ways, like the way their great grandparents did” (48 year old woman).

E. Traditional homelands

When asked if they felt it was important to stay connected to the land, respondents affirmed that they had never lost their connection to their land. They were adamant about keeping their homelands. Statements affirmed this connection such as “no white man will take it [our land] away from us for the second time” (17 year old man), “once it’s gone, it’s gone forever” (43 year old man), and “I love my land, it is beauti-

ful” (38 year old woman). “We have the richest land, we get all our traditional food from it, it gives us everything we need” (80 year old man). The people believe that “the land sustains us” (43 year old man). People also asserted their inherent right to the land on which they lived “long before Canada became a country” (63 year old man). Their ancestral homeland was referred to as “the land that God put us to live on” (52 year old man). Connection to the land meant staying close to the land and spending time on the land. A participant articulated this feeling: “I love my land” (19 year old man), another participant stated: “this country is my home from the beginning of time” (45 year old man).

People spoke of their ancestral homelands with passion and commitment to live on their lands now and in the future. Participants articulated their connection to land by stating “We are people of the land. We still live here and will be here forever” (41 year old man). The land was described as “holding on to our purpose in life” (43 year old man), and that if the land was taken away, the people would be lost. When speaking of his homelands, people affirmed that they felt “peace” on their homelands. One participant declared: “I feel connected... freedom where I do not feel restricted. James Bay is a vast area... this is my land where no one can say to me “no trespassing”. I have the freedom to go wherever I want” (58 year old man). Other comments underscored the importance of maintaining the connection to the homeland: “the land is a good place, it is clean, it smells good... there is peace out on the land” (34 year old man); “the land is my favourite place to be” (21 year old man); and finally, “the land is our place of belonging, I don’t feel that belonging in the south” (12 year old girl).

People repeatedly declared that they will never leave their homelands. They spoke of the spirits [of their ancestors] out on the homelands, and they believed that the old people were strong because they had such a strong faith in the Creator. They stated: “I feel good about what the Creator has given me, this is where I belong. My grandparents lived here long before the white man came here” (87 year old man). It was emphasized that “this land is our world” (32 year old woman). It was pointed out that “this is our mother land” (39 year old woman). It was repeated over and over that their homelands were given to them by the Creator and that the earth was referred to as a mother because all that they needed was provided by the land.

People were thinking of the future and they referred to possible changes that could come to their ancestral lands. People predicted that if there were natural resource discoveries on their traditional lands, it was important for the children to benefit from these ex-

tractions. It was expressed that “we need to maintain our existence [in our traditional homelands] for natural resources and economic developments in forestry, mining and other future resources within our lands” (56 year old man). People believed that survival for the future in regards to investments meant keeping and protecting the homelands.

The people’s connection to land is directly linked to their deep connection to their ancestors who had lived on this land as long as anyone can remember. It was stated that “our grandfathers belonged here since time immemorial” (55 year old woman), and “I love my land where my grandfather came from” (15 year old boy). Further comments were: “our forefathers walked and lived on this land for many ages. They connected us to this way of life and we still live that life” (67 year old man).

People saw the land as part of who they are as Cree people. It was stated that “our land base is part of our heritage, therefore it should be part of our existence” (18 year old woman). One pointed out that “if you lose your tie to the land, you lose who you are. I am a Cree and I am proud of where I come from and who I am” (44 year old man).

The people’s connection to the land is also seen as a vital part of who they are as Cree people. It was stated that the people strongly believed that the Creator was within the land and that the spirits of their ancestors will continue to live on the land. It was pointed out Kashechewan people are adamant to stay on their homeland because of its connections to their ancestors and to their families. Many people expressed their belief that the Creator has placed them in their homeland and that they cannot imagine abandoning their land. When the people speak of their homeland they are referring to their ancestral territories which extend far beyond the reserve boundaries.

The recommendation of moving to Timmins in a former report was a major concern among the people. A participant stated: “we were told that if we move to Timmins that we would still have access to our traditional lands. If I moved away from here, a part of me would be lost. It is easy for someone from somewhere else to say that we should all move to Timmins and that we would still have access to our homelands, but there is no guarantee that that will happen” (35 year old woman).

“If we are not here, we will not be able to control our territory” (14 year old youth). Control over ancestral homelands is viewed as a vital responsibility and it is expressed that “without a land base, it is hard to negotiate with any governments or various contractors” (45 year old man) and “If we move to Timmins, we

cannot hunt like we do up here. We will have to follow all kinds of laws, and there would be discrimination, it [Timmins area] will not be our land” (33 year) “How can we be told that we should move to some place like Timmins, it would be like telling people in the south that they must move to the James Bay area. This is not where they are from”

“I do not want to leave the reserve area, if we go out of the reserve, the government might push us out of the reserve. If something (minerals) is found on our reserve, those mining companies don’t care, they will just push us out of our land” (29 year old woman).

“We must make sure that our traditional lands are passed on to future generations” (56 year old man) and the “the younger generation needs to know how to live off the land, how to stay connected with our traditional homeland” (81 year old man).

People felt that if the community was going to be moved up the river and if the site was out of the reserve boundary, then the site should be designated reserve land by the government.

F. Harvesting the land

People stated that they must stay on the traditional land which is not only the reserve boundary but covers a large land mass. It was stated that they still survive off the land and live off the land, because “it has been passed on generation to generation” (56 year old man).

People said they wanted to stay in this area because it is the area where they practice their traditional pursuits such as hunting, fishing, trapping, gathering of medicinal plants, etcetera. A young person stated: “I still go hunting, fishing, trapping and camping with my family, my parents and grandparents. I think we should stay connected to our traditional land” (16 year old girl). A young person said that he was raised by knowing the land and stated “our grandfathers took us in the bush when we were young and they taught us everything we need to know to survive off the land” (17 year old man). Participants continuously referred to harvesting the land, fishing, hunting, camping and trapping as being a core part of their existence as First Nations people.

It was believed that the new site, which would be up the river, was where the natural environment was more conducive to traditional activities. It was stated that “the river at Site 5 is deeper and wider so community members can utilize canoes and other land-based activities as families” (46 year old man).

The younger generations continued to learn about the land from their parents, grandparents and extended family members. Children were also taught how to

survive off the land, how to hunt, fish and trap how to get wood in various ways such as by boat, snow machine, and pulling sleds. Children also reported learning how to travel on the James Bay and how to respect nature.

Other comments were: “I do not want to leave here; I do not want to go down south. I cannot be myself down there. I feel isolated and I do not want to leave the roots of my people, not now and not in the future” (18 year old woman). It was also pointed out that the people will no longer be told what to do and that it is up to the people to decide what is best for them. A participant said “No one, no white man [government], should tell us what to do, they cannot tell us where to live” (52 year old man).

G. Sacred responsibility to the land

People felt that they must take care of this land, their homeland, and they believe that it is their sacred responsibility to make sure the land is not abused. It is strongly believed by the people that their obligation to their homeland is sacred. It was reiterated by participants that “the Creator put us here, this is where we will stay” (52 year old man). Others commented “We belong here” (55 year old man) and “this is where I grew up” (45 year old woman). Further comments were: “we have buried our relatives on the land, and we can never leave this land” (30 year old woman), and finally, “the Creator who put us here cannot be overruled” (90 year old man). A majority of respondents stressed the importance of staying connected to traditional land of their ancestors.

The people felt that it was of paramount importance that they maintain their traditional homelands, that they carry on their ancestors’ way of life and that they maintain the connection to the land. It was expressed that “my relatives grew up on this land; this is the reason why I am connected to the land; my ancestors died here and I will die here too” (80 year old man). One person said that “I feel closest to Creator when I am out on my ancestors’ land” (45 year old man). Others stated that their grandparents, parents and family members are buried here and ask “how can we leave them?” One youth says: “This is where my *jabun* (great grandparent) died and also my other relatives, and they are buried here” (12 year old youth). Another youth says that “this is where my great grandparents and my grandparents’ traditional land is, and that is where we go to be close to them” (22 year old man). What they receive from the land is seen as a sacred gift.

The community people had a strong belief in the Creator and the sacred responsibility that they had in custodianship of the land. It was stated: “It is very important to hold to what is ours... Creator gave his

people the land to take care of it from the beginning of time” (69 year old woman) and “we have survived and lived from what the Creator has given to our people—the land” (62 year old man). Another statement was: “Our traditional land is our gift from the Creator... this makes us who we are” (41 year old woman).

One stated, “I feel connected to the land where my loved ones are buried” (19 year old woman), another commented, “It brings memories in how healthy the life was back then, it was peaceful, calm and clean, this is why I feel connected to the traditional land” (52 year old woman). Others noted, “This is where their relatives have lived and died here” (65 year old man); “the spirits are guiding us because of the conditions with all the things that are happening, if we move, maybe we will have a better community...” (73 year old man).

The relationship with the Earth was believed to be directly connected to the gifts given by the Creator, and people felt that they could never leave what God has blessed them with. People said that “it is good to hold on to the traditional way... it is where our relations come from, Mother Earth” (45 year old man). Just as a mother, the earth nurtures the people; everything they need to survive is on the land, such as food, water, medicines, shelter, and clothing, among other things.

Over and over again, the people said that it was important for children and future generations to carry on traditional survival in harmony with land.

H. Treaty

The fact that a treaty that was signed is very significant to the people of Kashechewan; Treaty Number Nine was signed in 1905 between the ancestors of Kashechewan people, the province of Ontario and the country of Canada. The people believe that the “Treaty is sacred where God was a witness that we were to live in peace with newcomers” (82 year old man), and that “we [First Nations] have held up to our promise” (62 year old woman). It was articulated that “this is the land that we signed a treaty, nation-to-nation agreement” (44 year old man).

It is strongly believed that the treaty must be honoured and that the people of Kashechewan must stay within their ancestors’ homeland. They believe that their ancestors signed the treaty so that they [future generations] can benefit from the treaty promises. The people believe that “upholding the treaty is honouring what our ancestors had signed because they [ancestors] wanted to secure the land for their future generations” (65 year old woman). It was stated that “this land is where our old people lived

before us... our ancestors signed a treaty with the government and the Crown... they signed the treaty for us, we are their future generations...” (39 year old man).

The people explained that the government promised that they [First Nations people] would always have their traditional land, and that they can hunt at any time and any place on their ancestral lands. One elder had also pointed out that the Indigenous people understood that, as the population of their band increased, the reserve land would increase and further stated that this promise had not been kept. It is reaffirmed by the people that the treaty signed in 1905 must be honoured and that “the treaty was a promise that we would always have access to our homelands” (84 year old man).

A participant stated, “Elders want a guarantee that the land where the community will be re-located will be designated as reserve land”; another said, “I want it in writing, I want the government to write, on paper, that if we move up river on higher ground that it will made into reserve land” (70 year old man). People reiterated that they do not want to lose their Indigenous and treaty rights. Participants stated that their ancestors had signed a treaty with Canada and Ontario, and that they need to take care of those treaty rights by guarding their homelands.

I. Urban site

Although they were a minority, those people who chose to move to an urban site felt that it would be less expensive to live near a town. They reiterated that the high cost of food in the north was a major problem. It was also commented that there could be more jobs in the south. Other aspects noted were that there would more to do in a centre like Timmins such as movies, bowling, shopping mall, a good hospital, good schools, highway access, and a better fire department.

On the other hand, participants noted that moving outside of an urban centre such as Timmins will cause more problems and that alcohol will become a bigger problem. It was stated that “substance abuse will get worse in an urban centre; when we were evacuated it was terrible. Some children went without food because their parents were gone; child neglect was a concern, this is just the tip of the problems to come if we move to a town” (24 year old woman).

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the direct input from the community members, the following recommendations were made:

1. Move the community up river to site 5, on the condition that this site be designated as reserve land.
2. Build an all-season road from site 5 to the current community site.
3. Affirm a declaration of ancestral homelands beyond reserve boundaries.
4. Develop a comprehensive plan to build a new community with detailed infrastructure in consultation with community members.
5. Create a strategic plan on community wellness with a holistic approach to education, health, social, economic, political and other aspects.

REFERENCES

- Pope, A. (2006). *Report on the Kashechewan First Nation and Its People*. Report submitted to Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada. http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/webarchives/20071122105546/http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/nr/prs/s-d2006/kfnp_e.pdf

