

Hunters and bombers

The Innu, who number approximately 16,000, are the indigenous people of Labrador and eastern Quebec. They are unrelated to the Inuit (or Eskimo) who live further north.

The Innu are a hunting people who have lived for millennia in the sub-arctic pine forests of eastern Canada. They are heavily dependent on the migratory herds of caribou (reindeer) in the region, and they also hunt many other animals, as well as fish, and gather fruits and berries. Today, many have paid jobs as well.

In the 1950s and 60s, under the combined pressure of the government and the Catholic Church, the formerly nomadic Innu were settled in fixed communities. They were particularly attracted by the promise of western education for their children. As an Innu man says, *'People thought it would be good. They saw white people were successful with their education. But white people have different aims, a different way of life.'*

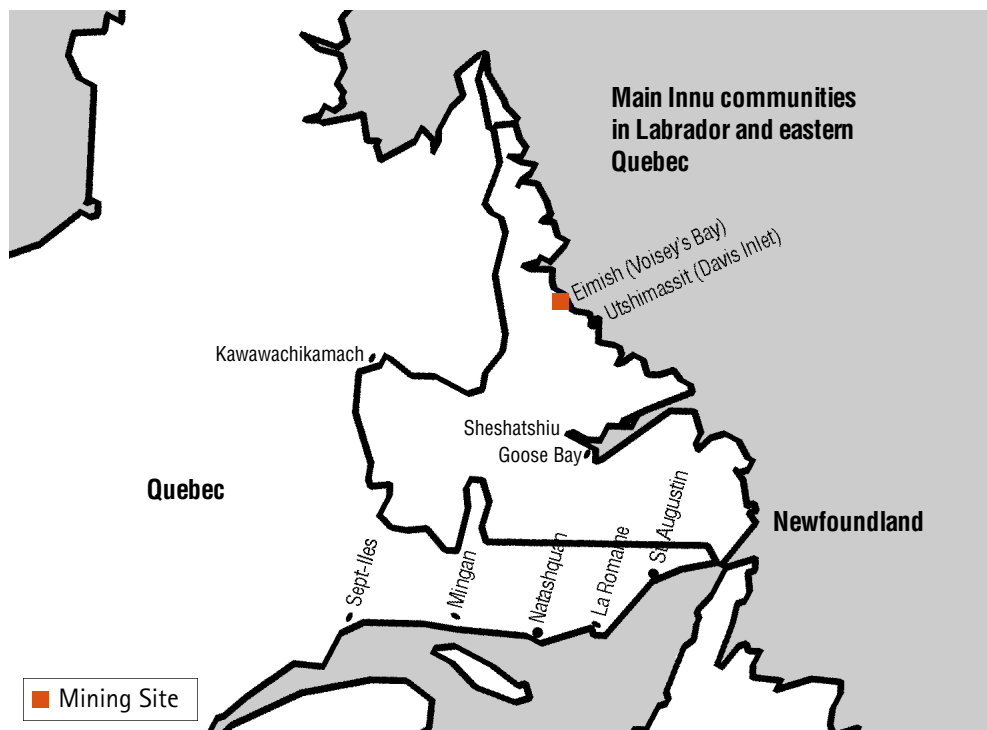
The transition from a mobile to a fixed lifestyle has been an extremely difficult one. Innu life in the communities is marked by extremely high levels of alcoholism, violence and despair. Elizabeth Penashue, an Innu woman, says,

'It was a mistake. Education is somehow connected with the problems we see today with children: a sense of rage, they break things, they end up in jail.... They are made to feel inferior at school, they are depressed and unhappy.... They are unsure of their direction. Before, they were proud to hunt with their fathers. Things fitted together and made sense.'

However, it would be wrong to think that the Innu are now a settled people in the process of becoming 'white'. They have fought to retain much of their culture, and many continue to leave the communities for six months of the year to live in small camps in the country, where they can hunt, fish and bring up their children as Innu.

Adapting to this sudden, forced change in lifestyle has been extremely traumatic for the Innu, as for so many other indigenous peoples. Working out how to combine Innu culture with the Canadian culture that surrounds and invades them requires both time and space. This is why being able to live on their own land in peace is so important. But the Canadian government denies them this internationally-recognised right, and persecutes them relentlessly.





Low-level flying

The Canadian Air Force base at Goose Bay (formerly an area where Innu women used to gather berries) is used by the British, Dutch and German Air Forces for low-level flying practice. They currently fly up to 8,000 sorties per year. All this takes place directly over the heads of the Innu. The areas most over-flown, the lakes and river valleys, are precisely those areas most used by the Innu. The peace of the countryside is therefore constantly being shattered, making it very difficult for the Innu to continue to hunt. A Federal Environmental Assessment recently recommended that the number of flights per year be increased to 18,000, even though they admitted they did not know what the impact of this would be. They also backed the expansion of the low-level flying area from 100,000 km² to 130,000 km², and the construction of a new bombing range – all on Innu hunting territory. Furthermore, the Canadian government has now invited the Belgian, Italian and French Air Forces to use Goose Bay.

In 1996 Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany and the Netherlands signed a new Multinational Memorandum of Understanding for low-level flight training over Innu territory in eastern Quebec and Labrador, which made it clear they intend to continue the low-level flying despite the Innu's vigorous opposition.

Mining

The Newfoundland government is handing out mining concessions to scores of companies on land which the Innu have never signed away. Not only is this ignoring the wishes of the Innu, but it is leading to a steep increase in the degree of industrial activity on Innu land. For example, in Eimish (Voisey Bay), two companies – Diamond Fields Resources and Archean Resources – announced a massive find of nickel, cobalt and copper in November 1994. The Innu were not consulted over this development despite the fact that they have burial sites in the area. Simeon Tshakapesh, ex-Chief of the Mushuau Innu has said, *'If exploration and development of our land continues, we will lose everything. The company*

is talking about jobs and opportunities, but we are talking about our land, our rights and our way of life.'

The discovery of this deposit has resulted in an intense level of mineral exploration and development activity on Innu and Inuit land in Labrador. On one hand, the Voisey Bay Nickel Company (the company formed to exploit the mine) is attempting to transform their discovery into a working open-pit nickel mine and mill facility as quickly as possible. On the other, several dozen companies have initiated active exploration programmes over the more than 250,000 mineral claims that now cover roughly 60,000 km² of Labrador.

The goal of the Innu Nation, the political organisation of the Labrador Innu, is for the land rights issue to be settled before the mine goes ahead. Survival is campaigning for this to be achieved.

The Newfoundland government is vigorously promoting other industrial developments on the Innu's land without their consent, such as roads, hydroelectric dams and snowmobile trails.

Survival has taken the following action in support of the Innu;

- organised letter writing campaigns;
- published numerous articles in our newsletters;
- coordinated five visits by Innu leaders;
- made many formal protests and organised several demonstrations, including an ascent of Nelson's Column in London;
- publicised their plight in the media;
- repeatedly lobbied the governments concerned;
- financially supported an Innu Newsletter;
- presented a report to the United Nations on the legal basis for the Innu land claim in 1987;
- made a submission to the United Nations Human Rights Commission in February 1995;
- arranged for questions to be asked in the French and Italian Parliaments.

Background Reading

Wadden, Marie, *Nitassinan - the Innu struggle to reclaim their homeland*, Douglas and McIntyre, Vancouver and Toronto, 1991.
Henriksen, Georg, *Hunters in the Barrens - the Naskapi on the edge of the white man's world*, Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, 1993.

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