

**Re: Domtar Inc.'s Project to Redevelop the Hydroelectric Potential of the Existing Chaudière Island Site in Ottawa**

**The following are the key points Elder William Commanda reiterates with respect to the Meeting with Domtar/Genivar on November 28, 2006.**

Additional issues were raised in the original request for elevation of the project to an Individual Environmental Assessment, and still remain pertinent.

Elder Commanda's primary aim was to share with Domtar/Genivar personnel the deeply felt convictions and responsibilities which obliged him to request the Individual Environmental Assessment of the proposed Domtar Project on the Chaudière of the Ministry of the Environment of Ontario. He fully recognizes that he is a ninety three year old First Nations person who has historically been denied the opportunity to impact on development within the land of his ancestors; he knows first hand the clout that companies like Domtar, Weyerhaeuser and Hydro Quebec have wielded over the natural resources of his homeland, and he is fully cognizant their power to continue with "developmental" projects that emanate from a world view quite contrary to his.

But it is a world view that he and many others believe has contributed to the precarious condition of the earth, plants, animals and climate, nation to nation relationships, economic imbalance and global health and humanitarian crisis, and he is compelled to bring his beliefs on further commodification of Mother Earth, Water and Sacred Sites to the table.

To return then specifically to the November 28 Meeting with Domtar/Genivar personnel, **Elder Commanda's primary aim was to "transform them" and convince them of the urgency of the need for new relationship with Mother Earth and the Waters.**

For him, for some considerable time, this *new relationship* has taken the form of a spiritual vision for the *Asinabka* Chaudière Falls/Chaudière Island/Victoria Island area, for a symbolic reconciliation with Mother Earth and the Waters, in the undamming of the Rapids, in what has been a sacred site for his ancestors from time immemorial. In this tiny spot, he has dedicated his prayer for all the Waters of Mother Earth. In his sacred vision, this area becomes the microcosmic site of reconciliation for all the Children of the Earth.

He attempted on November 28, 2006 to share his perspective by animating his world view to the extent possible with the strangers on the other side of the table by:

- introducing the spiritual by offering a smudge ceremony, to reconcile hearts and minds, and bring all to the discussions underway with the spirit of openness and sharing;
- inviting the drumsong in honour of the Water Spirit, guarded by woman in indigenous understanding of cosmology, and supported by man;

- showing the CBC documentary *The Mighty River*, (film by Frédéric Back, narrated by Donald Sutherland) to “fast forward” everybody around the table to a mainstream reflection of his very own thoughts about the costs of the years of unrelenting exploitation of the resources of the watersheds and of industrialization, and with its urgent message of a need for reconciliation with nature;
- explaining the Sacred Wampum Belts with their messages about the sharing of the grand natural resources and the values of his ancestors, about interconnection, and about the urgent need for change in our relationships with Mother Earth and each other;
- talking about the effort to designate the Ottawa River a heritage river, and the need to focus on its protection;
- sharing his larger spiritual vision for the area;
- stressing the need for wide consultation with the Algonquin Peoples, both on and off reserve, with First Nations, Inuit and Metis, and with the public of the National Capital Region and the country at large on this proposal;
- stressing the need for a broader environmental assessment, with exploration of cross border impact, ecosystem impact, impact of multiple projects within the watershed, and resource/revenue implications; and
- envisioning Domtar as assuming a leadership role as corporate citizen supporting a revitalized relationship with Mother Earth.

These are the pertinent points he reiterates with respect to the proposed expansion of the hydro electric plant on the Chaudière:

- **This site remains unsundered, unceded and unconquered Algonquin Territory;**
- Since time immemorial, and certainly since the coming of Champlain into this area, this has been acknowledged as **a most significant sacred site** and meeting place of the indigenous peoples of North America;
- **The spirituality of his ancestors is entirely based on the relationship with Mother Earth, Water, Wind and Fire;** though other religions have been imposed on the land and his people, and have separated many from this heritage, today, the sacred power of the area is again being embraced by increasing numbers; over the past four decades, Aboriginal peoples from across the continent have returned to the area with prayer and ceremony; women have offered water ceremonies at the site; and steadily over the past decade, Elder Commanda himself has conducted pipe, water and fire ceremonies at the site, with Algonquin, Aboriginal and with countless non- Aboriginal peoples as well, such that **this area is now acknowledged as a sacred site by ever increasing numbers of “main stream” peoples from across the globe. While the people have been denied access to the sacred Chaudière Falls and Island, these nonetheless have been of fundamental importance to the sacred ceremonies and prayers of the people, in fact being the primary reason why the site is so important.**

- It is true indigenous peoples have been denied access to this sacred area, since the arrival of the early settlers in 1800s; it is true that indigenous rights are still not affirmed in this country; and it is true that Aboriginal Peoples remain the most voiceless, oppressed and impoverished, while the resources of their homeland are exploited, appropriated and used disproportionately by others; still, this does not mean that this is just, right or acceptable.
- **Over the years, Elder Commanda has developed an inclusive, indigenous spiritual vision for the area, a vision which calls for the undamming of the Chaudière Rapids, a call many others have made before, and particularly in 1998.** When Domtar announced the closure of its pulp mill operations, he believed his people were closer to regaining access to the sacred island; with the growing global focus on exploring new sources of power, he hoped the old, outmoded, intrusive, ugly and inefficient hydro electric plants were coming to a natural end, and he hoped that that would have in turn led to the freeing of the magnificent sacred circular falls, and the collective embracing of the larger vision for the *Asinabka* area.

**Elder Commanda is not supportive of the further desecration of the Sacred Site by the invasive expansion into the *watery womb of the earth*.** He is also concerned about the heavy costs of such actions on future generations.

**In his view, then, far from his vision being outside the scope of the Domtar Project, in fact, at the heart of his vision lies a renewed expression of reverence for the sacred rapid, by returning it to its pristine state to the extent possible, and having it serve as the centre from which the rest of the vision for the area evolves.**

He has shared his vision widely over the years, and specifically with the National Capital Commission, the Department of Indian Affairs, Public Works and Government Services Canada, City of Ottawa, and with federal and provincial political leadership. It is unfortunate that Domtar/Genivar did not connect with him, prior to commencing their project development. Certainly, no one apprised Elder Commanda of this proposal till the small public notice in the Sun Newspaper was spotted by one individual.

While a few people have had an opportunity to discuss the Screening Report with Domtar/Genivar, by no means are the Algonquin Peoples and other Aboriginal Peoples of the Ottawa River Watershed cognizant of the proposed development; neither are the citizens of the National Capital Region, nor citizens of the country at large, who all have a vested interest in development in the Nation's capital. Such public consultation is a primary requirement in the Environmental Process, as specified in the guidelines.

**In view of these considerations, notwithstanding the congenial meeting he had with Domtar/Genivar, Elder Commanda still believes that an Individual Environmental Assessment is required to address many outstanding issues.**

## **Backgrounder on Elder Commanda's Work for the Environment**

Beyond this, we realize a paradigm shift is necessary to integrate Elder Commanda's perspective and position. His passion is to create a *Circle of All Nations* and he would like to see Domtar, amongst others acknowledge and embrace the worldview of the original peoples of this land.

By way of background, we offer the following information about his work and efforts. Please note that Elder Commanda is spiritual leader, philanthropist and humanitarian, who unlike most others, works entirely without the support of an organization, formal network or team of volunteers, sophisticated communications system or financial aid; nonetheless, he has reached countless people from across the globe who have been personally impacted by his animation of the spirituality, ideology, philosophy, and way of life of his indigenous ancestors.

It is a way of life that emerges from deep rooted spirituality entirely rooted in Mother Earth and the other chief elements, the Water, Fire and Wind, and in all his efforts, he is guided by the laws of nature; thus he has learned the importance of balance, respect, responsibility. Since the late nineteen forties, he and other indigenous leaders have brought to the United Nations their concerns for the great abuse of the natural resources of their lands, and their awareness of the shifting in the energy of the Mother Earth. This message of indigenous peoples, including Elder Commanda, became louder in advance of the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, when environmentalists and scientists began to take note of the destructive impact modern man was inflicting on the Earth. In 1993, Elder Commanda brought the teachings of the Sacred Wampum Belts, and in particular, the Seven Fires Prophecy Belt, to the United Nations Gathering of Indigenous Peoples, entitled, prophetically, the *Cry of the Earth*. In 1995, the eighty two year old elder served as spiritual guide for the *Sunbow Five Walk*, when a multi racial group of people walked from First Encounter Beach in Cape Cod to Santa Barbara in California over a seven and a half month period, to raise awareness of environmental issues and regenerate a sacred spiritual reconnection with Mother Earth. Commencing in 1967, and continuing with greater international attendance and participation each year, Elder Commanda hosts his annual *Circle of All Nations* Gathering in his home to advance development on his key priorities: Respect for Mother Earth, Indigenous Wisdom, Racial Harmony and Peace Building, and Social Justice. In the countless other conferences and meetings he is invited to participate in, he invariably and passionately raises the issue of greatest importance to him: the urgent need to rebalance our relationship with Mother Earth, the Waters, the Wind and Fire. He served as Spiritual Elder for the 2004 Boreal Rendezvous and the beautiful book on this effort is embraced by his prayers. He now serves as Honorary Chair for the effort to designate the Ottawa River a Heritage River, and is working hard to engage Quebec and others in this massive effort.

He has heard messages from the Mother Earth that most non indigenous peoples can not understand; on 11 Sept 2001, he was in South Africa, observed a dust storm blow up at the Sandton Centre, and said, something bad has happened to the world; later he learned about the twin towers in New York; somehow, Mother Earth had communicated some

profound message to him about his homeland, and today, few of us would deny that our lives have been transformed irrevocably since that moment. In a similar vein, Hopi Elder Martin Gashwaseoma visited Kyoto, Japan, a month before the massive earthquake in that city, and he warned that some significant Earth change would occur there shortly; ironically, this place has now given its name to the global environmental crisis.

Elder Commanda regularly reminds us of the essential role water plays in our lives. He sees that mankind has violated our sacred relationship with this precious, life sustaining element. His *Circle of All Nations* Gathering in 2004 focussed on the protection of water, and in November 2006, he organized a WaterLife Workshop focused primarily on the Ottawa River, the Heritage River of his ancestors.

He has long called for the dismantling of dams. For him and for his ancestors, waterfalls were and are places of spiritual power, and those with underground channels, (like the so called Devil's Holes in the *Asinabka* site) are even more charged with spiritual energy. This ancient belief is evident in the Petroglyph site on the fringe of Algonquin Park.

Elder Commanda describes the rivers as the veins of Mother Earth, and he points to the build up of poisons and cancers when the passage of the water is artificially blocked by concrete. Certainly, immediately the Chaudière Rapids were first dammed, there was a cholera epidemic. He is firmly convinced that the law of nature demands that her rivers follow their own pathways to the ocean in their cyclical, seasonal processes of cleansing. He sees the state of our human, physical and emotional health aligned with the environmental crises of our times. He notes the endless fundraising efforts to fight cancers, and sees only an increase in the disease. This is no surprise to him – for him, it is the rebalancing of our individual and collective relationships with the elements that will contribute to our healing.

His *Circle of All Nations* is a work inspired by the fundamental conviction of his ancestors that “We are all related”. Thus, although he is deeply concerned about Indigenous rights and peoples, he reaches far beyond the confines of the reserve, and he embraces all of us and our children in his untiring efforts to present another way of looking at Mother Earth and All Her Children. Just about everybody he meets these days asks him to pray for some loved one dying of some new disease, and he, and many others, are firmly convinced that this modern malady emanates from our destructive relationship with Mother Earth.

He believes our very futures depend on transforming this relationship; hence, while recognizing the deep differences with which he comes to the table with Domtar/Genivar, and the invisible forces beyond, he nonetheless prays we will be able to bridge these differences and leave some meaningful legacy of hope for our children.

POST SCRIPT: ELDER COMMANDA PRESENTED DOMTAR/GENIVAR WITH A COPY OF HIS BOOK, *LEARNING FROM A KINDERGARTEN DROPOUT*, AND HIS BILINGUAL DVD, *GOOD ENOUGH FOR TWO*, WHICH REFLECT HIS PHILOSOPHY AND VALUES. (Dec. 11, 2006)