

Damn Those Dams

Witnessing the sight of Site C firsthand

By MATT J. SIMMONS

The landscape here in northeast B.C. is stunning. Staggering snowy peaks rise up from either side of the Rocky Mountain Trench, a vast valley that extends from the Yukon all the way down to Montana, paralleling the crackling power lines that stretch the same distance. I hike for a couple of hours for the view, up through the trees into the knee-deep snow that still covers the ground well into May; the giant body of water that fills the trench below only lost its layer of green-blue ice a couple of weeks ago. Everything feels fresh and I revel in the brightness of the blue sky and how it contrasts with the rest of this rugged northern world: the green trees, the brown earth, the grey rock, the white snow. But despite its beauty, this is far from an untouched landscape.

Williston Reservoir was created back in 1968, when the W.A.C. Bennett Dam was built across the Peace River. It is the largest “lake” in British Columbia and it’s actually quite beautiful from a distance . . . if you don’t know what it really is. But up close, the devastation wreaked by the flooding is immediately apparent. When I first saw it from the side of a logging road, I stopped—horrified—and took a picture with the same sort of fascination that makes people slow down to look at car crashes. My daughter in the back seat piped up, “Daddy, look at all the octopuses!” and I had to laugh, but I almost felt like crying. I’ve never seen anything on this scale: an immense tortured landscape of stumps, their spindly root systems

bare from erosion, spread out to the distant horizon. Edward Abbey said it best when he questioned, “Why is it that the destruction of something created by humans is called vandalism, yet the destruction of something created by God is called development?”

I’m witness to this strange and savage world with my archaeologist wife. She is up here while the water level is low, surveying the beaches of Williston Reservoir to protect the area’s remaining first-nations archaeological sites. Now BC Hydro wants to dam the Peace River again—the proposed Site C—near Fort St. John. Their website touts this so-called development as a source of “clean, renewable energy,” but as I look out at the haze of dust and the battered landscape, I just can’t see anything clean about this kind of energy. Site C would be the third dam on the Peace River, and BC Hydro is currently entering the consultation stage of the process—an opportunity for the public to have their say.

The effects of Williston Reservoir—which aptly reflect the potential impact of Site C—are vast. When the W.A.C. Bennett Dam was built, the Tsay Keh Dene First Nation band was displaced and much of their traditional territory lost under the water; they were compensated with a token \$35,000 for their loss. Four decades later, Tsay Keh Dene

and Kwadacha (Fort Ware) are finally reaching settlements with the government. Site C would have a similar impact on first-nations land, an impact that seems to me unconscionable.

The eco-implications of this dam and its reservoir aren’t limited to trees and the wildlife habitat they provide, but also extend to the humans who live here. Because what was once a treed valley is now a barren, sandy wasteland that annually fills with water, the dust storms in the area are epic. There are no plants to provide a thicker layer of soil and the dusty surface layer is picked up by the wind as it swoops down into the trench. BC Hydro, to their credit, is actively trying to fix this problem, which is the cause of growing health concerns in the local population.

But I shake my head in wonder at how they didn’t see something like this coming 40 years ago. When you mess with nature on a

scale like this, it’s a wonder the whole world doesn’t simply lay down and die. And if the rumour I’ve heard is true—that a one-centimetre rise in water level equals about a million dollars in revenue—then why are the towns up here so poor? The rise this year has been record-

breaking, averaging up to 40 centimetres or even more every day. The figures start to become baffling quickly. But where is the money going?

The next question is, of course, do we really need more energy—and, if so, why? There are so many proposals for alternative energy bandied around lately that I wonder why no one has simply said, “Hey, here’s an idea—let’s

all use less energy.” If we can’t come up with an alternative source of energy that is viable—solar, wind, geothermal, whatever—and make it stick, then we should do everything possible to cut down our consumption and simply force BC Hydro to abandon plans like this. But that leads to an even scarier question: would they ever stop? Those power lines stretch across our province . . . and they keep going, right across the border into America.

I went down onto the “beach” the other day and shared the sunset with a pair of young moose. It was sublime and beautiful, but melancholy. I walked down to the edge of the reservoir and stood there for a moment, thinking about what exactly the water in front of me means, and wished there was something I could do. I share Abbey’s abhorrence of dams and his desire to reduce them to rubble, but I know I’ll never go as far as that. After all, if I did, wouldn’t they just build another? **M**

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