



As in many other countries much of the electricity in Sweden is based on nuclear power. Three of the biggest nuclear power plants are placed in southeast of Sweden, outside the city of Oskarshamn. In Oskarshamn the local newspaper Nyheterna is covering the production at the nuclear power plants, but also much of the discussion how to handle the waste from the plants. In order to produce nuclear power it is necessary to have uranium. That is why Nyheterna's journalists Fredrik Loberg and Mattias Rubin went to Canada.

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Uranium has forced people to move



Annie Benonie
Photo: Mattias Rubin

THE ORIGIN OF NUCLEAR POWER

For over 30 years, a large proportion of the uranium used to produce electricity in the Oskarshamn nuclear power plant in Sweden derived from Canada.

Uranium mining has forced indigenous people to flee from the land where they lived for thousands of years.

– Mining companies came and robbed us of our country, where we lived, fished and hunted. The land will never be restored again to future generations, says 88-year old Annie Benonie who today lives in Wollaston Lake Indian Reservation.

To Wollaston Lake, which is the closest town to the world's largest uranium mine fields, no roads go. Tourists are not coming here, rarely some politicians and almost never journalists. After driving the car a thousand kilometres north from the city of Saskatoon in the Canadian state of Saskatchewan, mostly on gravel road, we are fortunate enough to catch the small ferry that takes us to the reserve.

Wollaston Lake is located thirty kilometers from the nearest mine, Rabbit Lake. From here, the Oskarshamn nuclear power plant in Sweden recovered much of its uranium, and OKG, the Swedish nuclear company, has a contract with the mining company Cameco to continue to do so until 2018, at least.



Impossible to live

In Wollaston Lake 88-year-old Dene Indian Annie Benonie lives. In her home in the middle of the village she welcomes us. Her grand daughter Flora Natomagan interprets as Annie, like many other elderly people in this part of Canada, only speak dene. After we've talked for a while Annie feels very anxious to ask some questions to us:

- You say you come from a distant country, where you use the uranium that comes from our country. I wonder if people who live where you live, where you have nuclear plants, what you gain from it? What advantages does it give you in addition to the jobs the industry creates?
- Does it bother the people where you live what is happening here in our country?
- Knows the people that our country has been destroyed because of this uranium mining?
- I want people in your country to know what is happening here because of the uranium industry, that it made it impossible for us to live the way we have always lived.

Traditional life

Before the uranium mines' time Annie Benonie and her family lived a traditional life. They moved around and lived in tipis, tents, in different places. They lived of fishing and hunting, fruit and berries, just as her ancestors did in North America for thousands of years.

– We live of what nature has to give us. Nature does everything for us, Annie says with pride in her voice.

Usually the family stayed at Collins Bay on the other side of the lake, where the Rabbit Lake mine is today. At Collins Bay Annie's husband Louis had his trap-lines, traps he caught small animals in. There he hunted caribou and elk. The family made the traditional medicine of nature's wild plants.

- A few times a year we came to a village like this, Wollaston Lake.
- Otherwise, we lived this way, in smaller homes or in tipis.

Saskatchewan mines have supplied uranium for both nuclear power and nuclear weapons countries since the 1950s. Mining companies are constantly finding new deposits with high level of uranium in various locations in northern Saskatchewan. Here lives almost exclusively indigenous, or First Nations people as they are called in Canada.

The money does not compensate



An afternoon in Wollaston lake in the fall 2009.

In the 1970s, Annie and Louis Benonie and their family were forced away from Collins Bay. They were promised compensation from the mining company. At first, one thousand dollars per year and eventually something more.

Flora, Annie's grandchild, were at home the day the mining company people came to write a contract with Louis.

Permanent reserves

-They negotiated how much he would receive in compensation. They asked Louis: How much you earn in a year for the hunting? They asked only about the hunting, nothing about the harvesting of the plants we used to do medicines, nor anything about fishing. This was nothing worth.

– The mining company paid the sum each year, until Louis passed away and then Annie also got some compensation.

– But the money does not outweigh the harm that uranium mining causes, Flora says.

– Now, people are forced to live in one place, in this kind of village, and cannot live in the manner we have done for thousands of years before Europeans arrived here.

The life of indigenous people in this part of Canada has been affected since the uranium mining began. When it is no longer possible to simply make a living from the traditional way of hunting and fishing, more and more people become permanent residents in the reserves. Wollaston Lake with a population of 1 600 is the largest reserve in northeastern Saskatchewan. The village is only thirty kilometers from the world's largest uranium mine fields. Unemployment is high. Many young people feel despair and rootlessness and drug use has increased.

Spokesperson

Indigenous organization in the Wollaston Lake, Hatchet Lake Band, has some influence and autonomy within the Canadian State. Whoever is elected chief has a special mandate to act spokesperson against the authorities and mining companies. All of Wollaston Lake is not included in the reserve. Part of the village belongs to the Canadian State. On this side the police station, a smaller airport, ferry situation, a hotel and the radio transmitter is situated. Here are some new modern buildings and in these police personnel live.

700 dollars a week

The houses located a few meters away, on the reserve side, are of much poorer quality, old and worn. Many houses have broken windows. The people who live in these homes are poor.

In one of the reserve's better houses stays 38-year-old Adam Besskkaystare, father of two children.

For him, the uranium mines across the lake opened up new opportunities in recent years.

– Yes, I work there, and it is good. Now I earn the equivalent of \$700 a week and it's more than I could when I worked in the shop here in the village, Adam says.

In three years he has worked in a mine called Cigar Lake.

Has apologized

Like the Rabbit Lake mine closest Wollaston Lake this mine is owned by the giant Canadian company Cameco Corporation.

– I work seven days and am free for seven days. It's nice, Adam Besskkaystare says.

– It's really not easy to find any job here.

Adam is one of the few from Wollaston Lake who work in mining areas. Some villagers would never consider doing it. Others have not the right qualifications. Cameco has about 1 800 employees at the mines. The company claims to have policy to as much as possible to get their labor from the north, very sparsely populated, parts of Saskatchewan. The Canadian government has also more clearly than many other countries apologized for how the Indians, the indigenous population, have been treated historically.

The population suffers

Doug McKay, who has Scottish ancestries, lives and operates in a small shop in Wollaston Lake. He feels that the mining companies and the State of Canada should feel guilt, because they ought to do infinitely more for the indigenous population.

– In relation to what the companies earn, it is hardly something that will benefit the district here, Doug McKay says.

– The thing is that people here are too nice. They should be entitled to a percentage of profits, when leasing their land. They should get back what is theirs.

Doug McKay accompanies us on a flight over the vast mining areas of northeastern Saskatchewan. From the small rented plane, we can clearly see the minefields. Mining requires enormous amounts of water. The forest is devastated. The bedrock that once served as protection against all radioactive materials in the soil is blown away. The crushed rock masses are not left on the field.

– But myself, I can not say I am absolutely opposed to mining, Doug McKay says.

– The worst thing is that the population is treated so badly, that poverty here is so widespread, unemployment so high and that neither the companies nor the authorities cares, he says.

Can make claims

Perhaps it might be better.

There are those who hope and even believe it. Jim Tsannie is one of them. He is the brother of Wollaston Lake's current chief Bart. Jim has worked for many years with indigenous issues.

– In recent years we have begun to emphasize our rights in a completely different way than before. Several of us have studied the problems. We have gained more opportunities to make demands on mining companies and authorities, Jim Tsannie says.



Every other week Rose and David Hansen operate the ferry between the indian reserve Wollaston Lake and the main land.



The indigenous population is discriminated, says Doug McKay.



There are plans of mining uranium in Snowshoe Island

- Previously, the representatives from uranium mining companies described in words we could not understand what would happen with the ground. We said mostly “well, well,” without at all being able to claim compensation.
- There is something going on now. We have learned more about the consequences of uranium mining and then we can make more demands. That is what we must do and it will prove in the future! Road construction south of the village of Wollaston Lake has recently begun, on the Canadian State's expense. But it is expected to take several years before it is finished. Mining companies have also helped with funding for an indoor hockey rink in the middle of the reserve.

Future generations

Flora Natomagán in Wollaston Lake is anything but impressed.

- It's good to have a job, an arena, sure! But we can not just think about ourselves.
- We must think of our future generations as well! If more and more of our land is destroyed, we have no country to live in. We must listen to our elders and their experience in our traditional way of life, Flora says.

Just like Flora Natomagán's grandfather, Rose Hansen's father has lost the families' traditional hunting grounds to uranium companies.

- Where my father had hunting traps are now one large mining area. Still, he tries to survive on the hunting ground, he has remained around the mining area, but it is not easy, Rose says.
- Rose is a fisherman by profession, but can not support herself from this. Every two weeks she and her brother David drive the small ferry between Wollaston Lake and the "mainland". Rose and David think that their dad should have gotten far more in compensation than what he did. How they will do, the demands for compensation they will be able to make the day their father goes away, remains to be seen. It is not easy to assert their rights against the international corporations. According to Rose fishing has also been affected by the environmental degradation that uranium mining causes. Rose describes how she, on several occasions over the years seen deformed fishes. But still, there are plenty of large, edible fish in the lake between the reserve and mines.

In Wollaston Lake many fear that mining will come even closer to the community. The population fears uranium mining also at Snowshoe Island, only about ten kilometers from the village. If so, even more ancient hunting grounds disappear. The villagers dread the new uranium particles with clear health implications will be disseminated by water and air.

The consequences if contaminated, radioactive materials once again begin to leak directly from mining companies' waste barrels nobody in Wollaston Lake wants to think about.

Our land will never be the same



Edward Benoainie was chief in Wollaston Lake when one of the biggest leaks from the mining area was discovered 20 years ago.

Photo: Mattias Rubin

Edward Benoainie, whose family operates a restaurant, shop, school bus services, ferry business and the hotel in the village, is also worried. Edward was the chief in Wollaston Lake reserve when one of the biggest leaks in the mine area was discovered nearly 20 years ago.

– I worked in the mines in the past four and a half years. By coincidence I flew over the mining area and could see how the barrels leaked hazardous materials straight into the wild. I knew immediately what had happened, because I had previously worked in the field. I rang up those responsible for the mining company. They answered me that it had not happened. The day after they were forced to come here and admit that there have been a leak, Ed Benoainie says.

– This was while the Berlin Wall fell. Therefore, it was pretty quiet in the media. But people here started to be more suspicious of how companies operate. We still do not know today whether and if so, what health effects this leak caused, Ed Benoainie says.

A number of similar leaks have occurred in Saskatchewan over the years. Authorities in Canada, however haven't found evidence of systematic health effects on humans, animals and nature in recent years.

But in our time in northern Saskatchewan, we have got several testimonies of mysterious illnesses. Flora Natomagan tells about a brother of Annie Benonie who died of cancer a few years ago, and that he himself was fully convinced that it was due to uranium mining.

Can't live as they want to

– There are things we will never know. Because there has never been any professional health assessment here, that we dare to believe. Flora says.

– In the village we do not have enough money to carry out independent investigations. Previously, we could go and drink the water from the lake, and we were able to fish without worrying about whether the water was contaminated or not. Now it is no longer so, Flora says.

– And we do not know how mining companies after they leave the mining areas will take care of all hazardous materials.

Flora is in a Steering Commit, an international organization of indigenous people, to gain more knowledge about environmental pollution.

– It is said that there is no connection between diseases we have here, and mining. But I'm skeptical, and people are wondering, worried, Flora says.

- Never before has there been asthma here. Even our young people in the village now has asthma. Before people died of old age and accidents.
- Yes, I want the mining industry to disappear, because it has destroyed the possibility for us to live as we wish. But I do not think it will happen, because there is money in control, Flora says.
- The future is not just for those of us living today but also for future generations. We must defend the land, water, air, against this destruction. We must maintain the way we lived before the Europeans came and took possession of the country.



Important that we know

Flora's grandmother, 88-year-old Annie Benonie, now lives alone in her small house in Wollaston Lake. When we talk in her home, memories and feelings are brought to the surface, that are difficult to talk about. But she says she wants to tell, because it's important that people also in Sweden know.

- My husband came to the mine area only once, and he would never return to it afterwards. When he saw what happened to our country, he said that it will never be the same again, that the land is ruined for so many years to come.
- People were healthy before mining companies arrived. But now, afterwards as time passes, there are more and more diseases.
- I do not know if it has to do with mining, but earlier we didn't see these diseases, Annie says.
- Animals natural way to move, has disappeared, and the land has been destroyed. That will never be restored.

It will soon be winter and cold in the Canadian Reservation Wollaston Lake when Annie looks us in the eye and says:

- People from your country are welcome here to see how the life we have lived for thousands of years has been destroyed.

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