

# Where Industry Meets ANCESTRY

WHEN IT COMES TO THE ALBERTA OILSANDS, the struggle that Aboriginal groups currently face between economic advancement and cultural and environmental preservation is too often described in black-and-white terms, characterized as a choice between a Faustian bargain with industry and a stubborn refusal to embrace the modern world. **Lorraine Hoffman** ('02 BA, Anthropology), on the other hand, paints a much more complex picture of the situation, one that suggests that preservation and progress need not be mutually exclusive.

Fort Chipewyan councillor  
Lorraine Hoffman ('02 BA, Anthropology)

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Labourer Doreen Britton on a break (left) and at work outside the new nursing station (right)



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At home (above) and near her grandmother's house in Fort Chipewyan (previous page)

**A**fter spending her childhood summers in the tiny hamlet of Fort Chipewyan in the northeastern corner of Alberta, Hoffman's love for her ancestral homeland and fascination with its history and culture led her to the field of anthropology, which in turn set the stage for her subsequent career as a community leader and advocate.

Her overriding passion for her beloved Denedeh (the ancient geographical and spiritual heart of the Dene people) is immediately evident, the conversation scarcely straying from the subject. “It's always been home for me,” she explains. “I went to school in the city but I always went home, and always enjoyed the beauty around me. We live in a really beautiful region on the edge of the Canadian Shield. And we have a great history that goes back thousands of years.”

Home, it would seem, needed her as much as she needed it. Within six months of moving to Fort Chipewyan after earning her degree, Hoffman was elected councilwoman for the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation (ACFN), an 890-strong band that has long enjoyed a friendly, symbiotic relationship with its neighbouring band, the Mikisew Cree First Nation.

The timing of Hoffman's studies and return to her community could hardly have been more fortuitous. The past decade has seen a sea change both for the Alberta economy (and the economy of the Athabasca region in particular) and for First Nations across the province — a period characterized by exciting new opportunities and new problems. Hoffman views the changes that the oilsands industry bring as equal parts negative and positive.

“These are really interesting times right now,” she contends. “First Nations have reached a level of autonomy where their rights are being recognized by the courts and companies have to consult with us. The government is no longer in a position to make unilateral decisions.”

In Hoffman's view, participation in one form or another in Alberta's oil-driven economy is a necessity for First Nations and she is quick to refute the still-prevalent notion that Aboriginal people are anti-development. “We're all capitalists here,” she says. “We're not anti-industry, but we do strive to find a balance. We need to find sustainable ways of doing things. I enjoy my culture and who I am today because my ancestors signed a treaty back in 1899 that set aside this land for us. Now I need to safeguard it for my descendants.”



A photo of Hoffman's grandmother Josephine Marie Mercredi (Saturnin), who passed away in 2009, hangs in the council office on a wall commemorating elders.

Fort Chipewyan's image as a tiny town on the northern fringes of Alberta is such that it is easy to forget the region was once a major economic epicentre at the heart of the North American continent. Established by the Northwest Company as a fur trading post in 1788, Fort Chipewyan was one of the first European settlements in what is now Alberta, at a time when the Athabasca region was the El Dorado of the fur trade. Meanwhile, the Chipewyan Dene, who share the region with the Mikisew Cree and a small Métis population, have a long and storied history replete with colourful personages such as Thanadelthur, the slave woman who helped forge a peace treaty between the Chipewyan and the Cree in the early 18th century, as well as Métis leader Louis Riel, whose mater-

nal grandmother was Chipewyan. The Chipewyan in turn share ancestry with a vast swathe of Dene-speaking peoples, stretching from Yukon and Alaska to as far south as the Navajo and Apache homelands, which straddle the U.S.-Mexico border.

It was this treasure trove of history and culture that initially drew Hoffman to the field of cultural anthropology. "It started with a book I co-authored entitled *Inkonze* [which means 'to know' in the Dene Suline language]," she explains. "The book is a comprehensive history of northeastern Alberta and its people since time immemorial, up to the signing of the treaties."

In writing her book, Hoffman was astounded by the consistency of the oral accounts of the region's history, as told by the Chipewyan elders, and how closely these paralleled the written accounts of Émile Petitot, a Jesuit priest who spent many years documenting oral histories in the region in the 1800s.

Hoffman's studies of cultural anthropology did much more than deepen her understanding of her ancestral culture. They gave her valuable tools that have since helped her advocate on behalf of her community.



Charlie Mark Cardinal, a local hunter and fisherman, setting out on a moose hunting trip (left) and with his smoked fish (above)

"When I started, I just thought I was learning how to do research and that I'd get paid to talk to our elders," she asserts. "Our relationship with the land is very subjective, very experiential, difficult to relate. [My degree] taught me the language of the law and it gave me that dialogue to be able to relate that experience to government and industry, enabling me to advocate for consultation."

Hoffman contends that negotiations between First Nations and government and industry representatives are often stymied by mutual misunderstandings stemming from vastly dissimilar perspectives and interests. "I've sat in meetings



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In a band council meeting. Also pictured: Chief Allan Adam, Councillor Monica Tuccaro

and seen people talk past each other,” she explains. “They just don’t understand each other because they’re coming from completely different sets of values. Our people are talking about what it means to be Dene and we know what our connection to the land means to us, and [government and industry] are talking about their economic interests. My training helps me cut through all that.”

For a town with a population of a little over 1,000, Fort Chipewyan has been on the receiving end of outsized media attention in recent years owing to reports of alarmingly high rates of unusual cancers, which many believe are linked to environmental pollution resultant from the oilsands industry. As councilwoman for the community, Hoffman has been both incensed by the perceived lack of action by the government and pleased that the crisis has prompted action by NGOs around the world.

“We’ve made an exceptional effort to bring our fight to the globe,” she explains. “The plight of the environment and the health of the community has been brought to the attention of the global community, and a select group of NGOs have assisted us to that end. This has helped us fund methodologies for monitoring, cleaning up the environment and developing laws to protect it.”

The problem that First Nations like the Chipewyan face much of the time, Hoffman explains, is that while the govern-

ment is now beginning to pay more attention to her community, the onus is far too often placed on the First Nations to conduct all the research and produce the statistical proof. In the case of the Athabasca River, U of A ecologists Erin Kelly and David Schindler’s startling study of water quality released earlier this fall, and the subsequent exhibition of deformed fish, hold the promise of greater government action, but for many it has been a long time coming. Says Hoffman: “We’re a small community. We just don’t have the capacity [for this kind of research].”

While the lion’s share of media attention that Fort Chipewyan has received in recent years has been focused on pollution and illness, Hoffman contends that economic development has the potential to bring all sorts of positive changes to her community, provided that future development is done in a sustainable manner.

“We’re in a watershed period,” she says. “Development really only began in the last 10 years and we could well be the next boomtown. It would be nice to have some amenities, because we don’t have much. We have the land and our people enjoy our recreational activities, but it would be nice to have a swimming pool, arts facilities, music teachers, and so on.”

Hoffman notes that the community now has growing corporate clout in the form of the ACFN Business Group and its counterpart, the Mikisew Group of Com-

panies, which bodes well for the region. And thanks to economic growth, the hamlet of Fort Chipewyan is projecting significant population growth over the next decade.

“We live in some of the richest land in the world and [have] very little to show for it so far. Why couldn’t we have the best school system that we can get, great museums, tourism? And maybe that will come. It’s about finding sustainable ways to make it happen. And with population growth, there will be more incentive for the government to support us.”

While the future remains uncertain for Fort Chipewyan, what does seem certain is that the Chipewyan and other First Nations need to carve out new niches for themselves in the 21st century. And with her thorough knowledge of her own people and nuanced understanding of the language and interests of government and industry, Hoffman’s vision of sustainable development through equal partnerships and mutual understanding looks to be one of their best hopes.

“Will [economic development] help sustain our country and our culture?” she asks. “I don’t know. But whatever happens here, we need to be able to determine our own destiny.” ■

**Benjamin Freeland** ('98 BA, History) is a freelance writer whose articles have appeared in *Alberta Venture*, *Alberta Views*, *The Globe & Mail*, *Legacy*, *Up! Magazine* and *Wild Lands Advocate*.