

Algonquin Petition to Governor General in 1862: A History of Indigenous Land Rights

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The “Transcript of Algonquin Petition to Viscount Monk, the Governor General in March 1862” is a document penned by twenty-four Algonquin and Nipissing people to the Governor General and served as a plea to the white settlers in the area regarding to their poor resource management – namely, the over hunting of primary food sources for the Algonquin such as deer, muskrat and beaver.¹ The authors of the petition also note their unceded and historical occupation of the Ottawa Valley as well as the legal ramifications of poaching.² The petition underscores the innumerable political, economic and ecological challenges that have plagued Indigenous communities since colonisation began, and highlights the legacy of Indigenous peoples' struggle for sovereignty and stewardship of natural resources.

Within the historical context of the 19th century, the petition serves as a testament to the devastating impact that colonialism had on the traditional lands of the Algonquin people and also helps to catalogue the history of Indigenous activism regarding sovereignty and stewardship. The document outlines deforestation as a cause of concern: “The Lumbermen and the settlers are constantly encroaching on our borders, whilst white Trappers in considerable numbers infest our Hunting grounds in the interior...”³ The clear-cut logging in the area of the Ottawa River had irrevocably altered the natural environment in which the Algonquin people resided.⁴ According to Kirby Whiteduck, “the devastation brought upon the forests, the animals and the Algonquin by cutting off their majestic forests” is clearly outlined in an earlier petition from the Algonquins in 1840.⁵ The loss of wildlife, which was highlighted in the 1862 petition, would have undoubtedly wrought not only sustenance issues for the Algonquin people but economic issues as well. The petition states that their main sources of sustenance were at risk: “killing off the Deer, Beaver and the Muskrat, which are the principal source of our subsistence...”⁶ More than two centuries post-contact, the Algonquin people were still carrying out their traditional

¹ Michen Pesindawatch, Nias Makwa, Miab Akwaiach, et al., “Algonquin Petition to Viscount Monk, The Governor General,” *Algonquins of Ontario*, March 1862.

² Pesindawatch et al., “Algonquin Petition to Viscount Monk, The Governor General”.

³ Pesindawatch et al., “Algonquin Petition to Viscount Monk, The Governor General”.

⁴ Kirby Whiteduck, “Our Majestic Forests: An Aboriginal View of Algonquin Park,” in *Algonquin Park The Human Impact*, eds. David Euler and Mike Wilton (Espanola ON: OJ Graphix, 2009), 36

⁵ Whiteduck, “Our Majestic Forests,” 37.

⁶ Pesindawatch et al., “Algonquin Petition to Viscount Monk, The Governor General”.

lifestyle in their territories.⁷ Given that they still relied heavily on hunting and gathering as a subsistence strategy, a steep decline in flora and fauna would have been devastating to their survival. Kirby Whiteduck's chapter in "Algonquin Park: The Human Impact" outlines several other similar petitions, dating from 1840 to 1862.⁸ This collection of petitions charts a history of Indigenous political strategy which not only demonstrates the historical context of the 19th century but serves as a precursor to more modern battles for autonomy amongst First Nations communities.

While these documents underscore the political strategies employed by the Algonquin and Nepissing communities, what is most telling about the 1862 petition is the rhetorical language that is employed. The opening line of the petition, "We the Chiefs and band of Indians known as the Tribe of the Algonquins of the Lake of Two Mountains beg leave most respectfully to represent ..."⁹ exercises European conventions in addressing colonial authorities as well as using the self-identification of "Chiefs" – a colonial convention. One might assume that this is merely a rhetorical strategy used to better reach the intended audience, but one could also argue that this calls to attention the impacts colonialism has had on the language and culture of the Algonquins and Indigenous communities as a whole. The Algonquins have, in essence, adopted not only the language of the coloniser but also the linguistic customs needed to stand on the same political battlefield. Further, the line, "Your Petitioners therefore pray that our case may be taken into consideration and that an Act may be passed during the present Session of the Legislature ..."¹⁰ adopts colonial customs of governance, and seeks to amend the issue through colonial legal channels. The use of language by the Algonquin people in this document emphasises an important intersection between power, linguistics and culture against the backdrop of colonialism in the 19th century.

Although the petition highlights issues such as ecological misuse, Indigenous land rights and the interplay of linguistics and power dynamics, it poses some limitations to our understanding of the history

⁷ Whiteduck, "Our Majestic Forests," 47.

⁸ Whiteduck, "Our Majestic Forests," 37-49.

⁹ Pesindawatch et al., "Algonquin Petition to Viscount Monk, The Governor General".

¹⁰ Pesindawatch et al., "Algonquin Petition to Viscount Monk, The Governor General".

of this period. The concerns of the Algonquin people are clearly stated, as noted in this paper, but it is important to consider how holistic this representation is. Does the petition encapsulate the entirety of the Algonquin's perspectives? One might assume, given the context of colonialism, that all the Algonquin people shared this viewpoint, but that might be an overgeneralization of a diverse group of people. Furthermore, it's vital to also consider the influences and constraints that colonialism plays in the dialect and tone of the document. The power dynamics of colonial governance most certainly affected, at the very least, the content of the document, as is highlighted in the rhetorical language used.

In conclusion, the "Transcript of Algonquin Petition to Viscount Monk, the Governor General in March 1862" sheds light on many historical and even modern issues surrounding colonisation and Indigenous struggles for land rights. As Kirby Whiteduck highlights in his chapter in "Algonquin Park: Human Impact", the ecological effects brought on by European industrialism affected not only the Algonquin people in the 19th century but also had far-reaching impacts into modernity.¹¹ Whiteduck also highlights several other petitions that catalogue the history of Indigenous peoples' fight for sovereignty.¹² The ecological impacts of the 19th century, coupled with more recent developments such as global warming, may underscore a need for Indigenous stewardship. Lastly, this document highlights an important cultural concern regarding power and its effect on language and culture. The rhetorical language used in the petition is both persuasive and reverent and, arguably, adopts the language of the colonists. Exploring the ecological, linguistic and cultural facets of this document, this petition brings to light the complex web of challenges that have shaped – and continue to shape – the relationship between Indigenous peoples, the environment and the government in the 19th century and today.

¹¹ Whiteduck, "Our Majestic Forests," 48-52.

¹² Whiteduck, "Our Majestic Forests," 37-49.

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