Anishinaabe governance and the commons: The Whitefeather Forest Initiative for community economic renewal

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Abstract

Community-based land use planning has opened up opportunities for indigenous communities to develop resource management activities based on their values and institutions. Many traditional land-use activities of indigenous communities have been identified with complex common property systems. I present a case study which explores the commons system of Pikangikum First Nation, an Anishinaabe community in Ontario, Canada. The objectives of this paper are 1) to identify salient aspects of the traditional governance system of Pikangikum, relating to activities on the land, and 2) to analyze the adaptability of land-use institutions within the scope of a new land-use planning approach. Property rights and management of local resources can be objects of struggles with state resource management agencies. When traplines were registered in Pikangikum, First Nations people were confronted with a new system of rules introduced by the government. However, trappers continued to practice trapping, hunting, and fishing using customary institutions and values rooted in their traditional family areas. Findings were that while boundaries between traplines figured prominently in the introduced system, adaptability and fluidity of movement of Pikangikum people across these boundaries was maintained through Pikangikum social values and institutions. The tenure of traplines held by Pikangikum people is understood by them to prevent incursion by resource developers from outside, as well as to represent an understanding between the community and the resource management agency regarding traditional forms of spatial authority for land-based activities.

Key Words: *first nation, pikangikum, property, trapline, Ojibway, Anishinaabe, values, institutions, moral economy*

Introduction

Common pool resources share two characteristics: 1) exclusion or the control of access of potential users is difficult, and 2) each user is capable of subtracting from the welfare of other users (Feeny et al. 1990). These are known as exclusion and subtractability problems of the commons. Exclusion refers to the ability to exclude people other than members of a defined group. Berkes and Davidson-Hunt (2007) specify that some indigenous groups do this through normative notions of respect for the traditional area of a social group. In the case of Pikangikum First Nation, an indigenous community in northwestern Ontario, Canada, this traditional area is currently marked by the confines of 20 trapping areas for the purpose of a land-use planning approach that has been moving forward since 1996. This approach aims to guide land-based economic renewal for the First Nation through forestry, and management of protected areas and tourism in Pikangikum's traditional area. Problems of exclusion have become especially important in an increasingly interconnected world in which indigenous rights to resources are constantly challenged by outside interests. Pikangikum Elders have articulated that the forest and its

species will remain healthy as long as their rules of respect continue to be followed. Exclusion and boundaries regarding commons resources enters the discussion strategically, relating to activities of outsiders which impact Pikangikum's traditional area, but also in terms of traditional economic activities on the land in relation to the system of trapping areas.

Commons scholarship generally holds the world view that property relations influence the ways in which people use resource systems, where institutional arrangements for common property can positively influence resource use, access, and conservation (Johnson 2004). In this scholarship, the focus is on rules-in-use or behavioral norms, including rules for self-governance, monitoring mechanisms, and sanctions. It would seem that the main issues in examining changing natural resource based economies would be the ways in which common property institutions impact on exchange, sharing, and learning in order to create new kinds of interactions with the outside, while fostering knowledge-building networks to realize new activities (Davidson-Hunt 2006). Natural resource management knowledge must be produced at different scales in the landscape, in which the Pikangikum trapping area represents but one. These are concerns which must be addressed, it would seems paradoxically, within the context of boundedness of user groups and communities with respect to commonly-held resources. The adaptiveness of commons institutions within the context of this boundedness is in need of further examination in order to clarify some of the complexity of resource management in an interconnected world. In addressing this, I draw on work with Pikangikum First Nation, including life history interviews, field trips, and workshops with senior trappers and Elders. I examine briefly how Pikangikum maintains adaptiveness in terms of commons governance, while retaining control in their area.

Pikangikum and the Whitefeather Forest Initiative

The Whitefeather Forest Initiative (WFI) is a land-use planning initiative initiated by Pikangikum First Nation, in Partnership with the provincial Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) for the Whitefeather Forest, an area of 1.3 million hectares in northwestern Ontario, Canada (http://www.whitefeatherforest.com). Pikangikum First Nation is an Anishinaabe (Ojibwa) community with a population of approximately 2300. The WFI includes plans for Pikangikum to manage a Sustainable Forestry License as well as parks and protected areas and tourism in the Whitefeather Forest. Pikangikum talks about doing forestry respecting their own knowledge, and values. The foundations of this approach are presented in their Land Use Strategy (Pikangikum First Nation and Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources 2006). In this strategy, Pikangikum illustrates the way they wish to make forestry work for them, rather than this industry continuing to be a threat from intruding southern forestry operations. I understand Pikangikum's knowledge to include both traditional ecological knowledge concerning human-environment interactions, as well as norms, rules and appropriate behavior *vis-a-vis* activities on the land (i.e. Berkes 1999).

In the planning phase, the need for knowledge has been quite high, as government planning requirements need to be met, and activities are being discussed which have potentially high social and ecological impacts. Because of this, the community has placed responsibility for guiding the planning process with the Elders of the community. Interaction on the land and in the community with the MNR has become the norm over many years of practice in management of trapping, fishing, and hunting activities. With the WFI, consultation with the MNR has taken a unique form as an Elders Steering Group is now the forum through which Pikangikum meets with MNR personnel

Governance, family areas and the trapline areas

In Indigenous knowledge systems, authority comes from personal interactions on the land (Davidson-Hunt and Berkes 2003; Lane 2002). In the case of Pikangikum, these interactions have traditionally occurred at the scale of family areas. Elders have made references to traditional family area boundaries, where family areas are centered around major lakes. Individuals on these family areas would trap an area decided upon by the families as the extent to which they wished to travel during trapping activities (interview transcript, Elder Norman Quill, August 3, 2006). In the Anishinaabe family area system, Elders have authority tied to their knowledge of the land: “Elders that had influence had knowledge of these areas. They set things in motion.” (interview with Elder Oliver Hill, September 10, 2007). A senior trapper—usually an active hunter and trapper with greater experience in that particular area—would have responsibilities in terms of inviting others to use parts of the area, and observing that resources are equitably distributed among users. Attention given to authority in the Pikangikum system should not be equated with hierarchy or authoritarian governance. Everyone holds knowledge that derives from their personal experience on the land. Therefore, while senior trappers hold authority with regard to certain resources, others with knowledge regarding sites where medicinal plants can be found, or camps along a waterway also have authority regarding their use. Authority in the Pikangikum system ultimately derives from knowledge gained through personal interactions on the land.

In 1946, family areas received certain recognition by the provincial government in the form of a system of registered traplines. These were a new form of property institution designed to limit fur bearer resource use to members registered to a trapline area, while excluding outsiders, including White trappers encroaching on Pikangikum's traditional area from the south. To Pikangikum, the registered trapline system became a way in which spatial authority over family areas, held by Pikangikum people, was given recognition by the government. Pikangikum Elder George B. Strang, while telling me how trapline boundaries were decided upon, explained how it was important to respect his Elders' decisions. George's father played a role in deciding the boundaries, so it is George's responsibility as a senior trapper to make sure those boundaries are respected today:

> “The boundaries were not written by the MNR. The Anishinaabe people were asked where their trapline areas were, and that's what their response was. The boundaries that are in my trapline area were written by my father and [his brother]. That's why it's so important because the Elders at the time drew those boundaries. These boundaries will not change. They will continue as they are. MNR will not change these boundaries.” (interview with George B. Strang, October 25, 2007).

Authority for management of a trapline area is held by a senior trapper who typically knows the land well because of long-term personal experience travelling and hunting on that area. Under this system, trappers need to ask permission from the senior trapper before using an area to trap for fur. With respect to use of subsistence resources such as fish, moose, or small game, there is no requirement to ask permission from the senior trapper. However, it is important that an area be treated with respect, and that animals and plants in the area receive respect. For example, Elder Solomon Turtle holds knowledge of medicinal plants on a major lake which is at the center of his trapline. Solomon has warned people over the community radio to keep the area clean by removing cans and other garbage left on the ice while fishing in the winter (Interview with Matthew Strang, November 2, 2007).

Usually a trapper is registered on a trapline with other extended family members, but it is

not unusual for changes in membership to occur from year to year. Cases that merit changes in trapline membership include trappers who do not have an area of their own, relatives or friends who would like to trap together, and those who are in need because of depleted resources in their own area. However, Pikangikum Elders spoke of how they felt the trapline system resulted in restricted freedom of movement which they recognized within their system of family areas. George B. Strang described to me the way people were accustomed to moving about the landscape before the trapline system was put in place:

“In their travels [Anishinaabe people] would meet one another, like Cat Lake people and Lac Seul people [other Anishinaabe communities near Pikangikum]. They would meet along their travels. That's before the boundaries were written.” (interview with George B. Strang, October 25, 2007).

Elders recall that before the trapline system was in place, they were able to go anywhere on the land, and trap as long as they obtained permission from the person who had authority for that area (Elder Oliver Hill, unpublished field notes, July, 2007). Under the new registered trapline system, enforcement of new rules for trapline membership was required by the government. Trappers were told to report infringements, and to confiscate traps that were placed on the wrong trapline. In the trapline system, the system of authority has been effectively reduced to interactions between senior trappers, and MNR officials. Thus, in terms of Pikangikum's relationship with the MNR, the complexity of traditional authority concerning relationships to the land has been greatly reduced. The WFI presents the opportunity for new sets of relationships between Pikangikum, the MNR, and other outsiders that can help restore understandings of traditional governance through the family area system.

Pikangikum Elders have placed emphasis on the role of the WFI in negotiating space for Pikangikum to continue to procure a livelihood in their traditional area following their governance system. Returning to the problem of exclusion in the common property literature, the primary threat seems to come from outsiders' activities in the area, and Pikangikum people are very much aware of the consequences. Elders are concerned about Pikangikum people losing their connection to the land to outsiders such as the MNR, as outsiders take over that relationship in a representative rather than a personal manner through bureaucratic natural resource management processes. The WFI strategy has been to plan for new economic activities on the land, which they hope will renew traditional processes of learning, teaching, and authority for their youth, as well as foster new understanding of their approach among outsiders. In the Pikangikum governance system, it is up to individuals, including outsiders working with Pikangikum such as MNR officials, to learn appropriate behavior regarding resource use and personal relationships. Planning is under way for a teaching center, and Elders continue to insist that outsiders come to stay in Pikangikum to learn from them.

What's at stake? Community development of a land-based economy

Contemporary anthropological literature on the commons has emphasized less the “rules” of collective management of common property, and more the collective resistance to prevent appropriation of lands (Ray 2006). Changing relationships with the state have a tendency to alter power relationships and institutionalize local proprietary rights within state bureaucracy (Feit and Spaeder 2005). Colonial authorities' recognition of certain property institutions may also results in their simplification (Tanner 2007). Tubtim and Hirsch (2005) draw attention to non-privatizing forms of exclusion that tend to be missed in the commons

literature. Simplification of prior access rights receive much less attention than expropriation in favor of privatization. Simplification may show an apparent combination of equity, efficiency, and sustainability. For Pikangikum, there is a constant threat of loss of authority through simplification of these relationships, and therefore also restricted terms of access to their traditional area. By realizing an Initiative with the objective of continuation of a land-based economy, Pikangikum is hedging against types of change that would lead to further loss of their connection with the land.

Pikangikum people remain connected to their land through going out to hunt and fish on their traplines, even though the land-based economy (predominantly fur and commercial fishing) has largely collapsed, and few trap today to supplement income. There is a strong mis perception of hunting societies as so delicately balanced and fragile that they cannot accommodate innovation and change. Contact and interaction with the outside world does not automatically undermine these societies (Solway and Lee 1990). This relationship is certainly more complex in Pikangikum's case. Although Elders have identified the need for continued connection with the land, this has become increasingly difficult because of economic realities and institutional barriers which restrict people's ability to move about following traditional systems of governance.

In this paper, I took a qualitative look at Pikangikum's commons governance system. For land-based cultures, as is Pikangikum's case, control over traditional land has social and cultural importance, as well as political and economic. Natcher and Davis (2007) make the distinction that in indigenous governance systems learning is more characteristic of interactions between users, as contrasted with enforcement of rules. The Pikangikum commons becomes the cultural boundaries within which Pikangikum people operate according to a culturally appropriate set of rules and norms, while maintaining controlled access to outsiders (and insiders) who have not learned to operate by these norms. In this sense, it is productive to conceptualize boundaries recognized by the community as the nexus in dialog in cross-cultural learning. Pikangikum is negotiating authority for its traditional area in terms how land-use developments will take place in the near future. Pikangikum Elders insist that they have never given up authority to manage their traditional areas. However, in keeping with traditional understandings of authority, Pikangikum Elders wish to have these boundaries open to learning interactions.

Characteristics from this case study can enrich our understanding of the dynamics of the commons, as this community begins to engage the state and the global economy in new ways that require them to produce new knowledge for new land-uses. The family area system is a set of institution that is perceived by Elders to be important in terms of continuing land-based activities of Pikangikum people. New land-uses being planned for under the WFI such as forestry and protected areas represent different kinds of activities and therefore warrant new approaches and adaptability of institutions for their planning and management. In the Pikangikum system, individual learning derives from personal interactions with the land. In the WFI, individual learning is brought together through the Elders Steering Group, and through meetings in which senior trappers from different traplines relate their knowledge. The result is new natural resource management knowledge. In the family area system, individuals are embedded in relational networks that provide an umbrella for the processes by which knowledge can develop (Davidson-Hunt 2006). Spatial authority operates at different scales, where the trapline is recognized to be under the authority of a senior trapper, but where certain sites are known to be used and managed by those with knowledge of those areas. Thus a senior trapper may defer to

others. The family area system thus becomes a critical, multi-scale set of institutions that relates directly to the adaptability of Pikangikum natural resource governance.

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