

Indigenous Political Ecologies and Floodwater Governance

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Due to its geophysical features and climatic conditions, the southern portion of the Canadian province of Manitoba is prone to flooding. Significant floods in Manitoba in 1950 led to the establishment of the Royal Commission on Flood Cost Benefit, which recommended the construction of infrastructure to prevent major floods in Winnipeg. In the 1960s, the Winnipeg Floodway was constructed to divert water from the Red River into a 47-kilometer-long channel located on the east side of the city of Winnipeg and is now part of a system of more than 400 kilometers of flood-diversion channels that extend across Manitoba. In addition to its unique size, the decision-making process that led to the construction of the floodway was also the first time that cost–benefit analysis informed infrastructural decision-making in Canada. At the time of its construction in the 1960s, the Winnipeg Floodway in the Canadian province of Manitoba was one of the most significant earth-moving projects in the world, second only to the construction of the Panama Canal.

This research examines how decisions about flood-water control made in the 1960s continue to reverberate today, focusing on the economic, social, and ecological consequences for Indigenous communities. Although this infrastructure has saved the City of Winnipeg and other smaller communities from flooding on numerous occasions, diverted floodwaters regularly flood Indigenous communities in Manitoba with significant social, economic, and environmental consequences for those communities. For instance, in 2011, nearly 5000 people from the community of Lake St. Martin were forced to evacuate. They remained in temporary accommodations for more than five years while provincial and federal governments argued about who was responsible for the cost of rebuilding the community.

While events such as the 2011 flood are often framed as “natural disasters,” such disasters are never simply natural but have distinct political causes. Political ecology explains how environmental problems are conditioned by biophysical as well as political-economic structures and provides a useful conceptual framework for understanding the sustainability of infrastructure requirements. However, political ecology has been less attentive to the settler-colonial dimensions of human–environmental relations. This research aims to re-frame sustainability from a perspective that foregrounds Indigenous governance and knowledge traditions to broaden current understandings of urban political ecology while also challenging the logic of cost–benefit analysis that continues to inform infrastructure planning.