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“Ring of Fire”: Suffocating Indigenous “Breathing Lands”

The Crime

In spite of serious environmental and climate change consequences, the Ford government is committed to accelerating mining development deep within traditional Indigenous Territory without first obtaining free, prior and informed consent. The mining industry has dubbed an area containing a multi-billion-dollar resource “play”, some 750km northwest of Thunder Bay, as “the Ring of Fire”. First Nations, on the other hand, know it as the “Breathing Lands”.

The different names reflect the divergent views of Settler and Indigenous cultures toward Turtle Island. One views wild spaces as endless storehouses of raw materials ripe for extraction and profit in the service of global supply chains. The other sees a living, breathing complex of interconnected life from which humans should only harvest what can be sustainably shared.

The Ford government is using all available means to accelerate resource extraction access road construction into the Ring of Fire area and has expressed extreme frustration with both Indigenous resistance and time-consuming federal and provincial environmental impact assessments. Ford himself famously threatened during the last provincial election to drive the bulldozers himself if the “red tape” standing in the way of development wasn’t cut.

In an effort to divide and conquer opposition, a newly elected Premier Ford ripped up a 2014 agreement with the affected First Nations regarding the terms and conditions

under which they would collectively consent to development proceeding on their lands. Instead, he’s pursuing bilateral agreements with individual First Nations desperate to end deep cycles of poverty and lack of services, making financial relief contingent on their active sponsorship of access road projects and mineral development on their territory.

To accelerate expanded resource extraction, Ford recently amended the Far North Act through Build Ontario (Bill 43) which became law in December 2021. This omnibus legislation “streamlines” planning processes and removes over 225,000 sq km of land in Northern Ontario formerly protected from development.

The blasting of access roads to facilitate resource extraction into the Breathing Lands is fraught with both local and globally significant climate risk. The region is home to one of the world’s largest remaining intact natural storehouses of fossil carbon – Ontario’s northern peat lands. Canada is home to over a quarter of the world’s carbon-sequestering peat lands, a huge proportion of which is concentrated in Ontario’s Hudson’s Bay Lowlands. Those peat lands include areas of permafrost which resource





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development projects make more susceptible to melting thereby releasing carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. Ontario's permafrost areas are currently protected to a surprising degree by the snow packing activity of one of Canada's largest remaining caribou herds. That herd, in turn, is put at serious risk by the disruption of its feeding grounds and migration routes by resource access road development.

Keeping the carbon in Ontario's peat lands in the ground is central to containing global warming and meeting the world's, Canada's, and Ontario's emission reduction targets. The Ford government's aggressive enabling of the Ring of Fire mega-development, regardless of the climate risk involved, exposes its continuing denial of the scale of the climate emergency we face and any meaningful effort to address it.

Towards a People and Climate First Alternative

In 2021, a number of First Nations living in and downstream from the Ring of Fire, called for an immediate moratorium on any further exploration and other mineral development activity on their lands. This moratorium would be in place pending the completion of the federal and provincial environmental assessments of the two proposed access roads as well as a federal regional environment assessment looking at the wider impact of resource development. The government of Ontario

has rejected any such halt to Ring of Fire mineral exploration activity.

A moratorium, in any event, is only a short-term stop-gap measure when a permanent solution must be found.

Canada has ratified the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP). A central principle in that Declaration is that development on Indigenous Territory should only proceed with the full, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) of the Indigenous People within the affected lands. FPIC goes well beyond the mere "consultation" requirements contained in existing environmental assessment processes.

While the law implementing UNDRIP within Canadian Federal jurisdiction (C-12 passed in July 2021) does not insert a clear FPIC override into federal law, it contains a process required to make federal laws consistent with UNDRIP principles. However, the federal legislation cannot and does not amend Ontario's legislation governing the approval of resource projects on Indigenous Territory.

- ! A Climate and People First Climate Plan for Ontario, must start from recognition of Indigenous Sovereignty over their traditional territory.**
- ! Developments like the Ring of Fire should only proceed with the full agreement of all affected Indigenous Peoples under conditions free from the economic and social coercion imposed by the colonial occupation and exploitation of their traditional territories.**

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