Heading north once more on the long and meandering road, the large sign pointing the way to Grassy Narrows again comes into view. The road to the left reaches the reserve in a few short minutes. The first thing one might notice about the reserve is how hilly it is. The second thing would likely be the proximity of so much water. On all sides, the reserve is surrounded by a jigsaw puzzle of clear northern lakes, most of them part of the English-Wabigoon River system. The shoreline refuses to remain straight for even an instant and the roadways’ constant curves follow suit. The reserve’s homes and public buildings, its water tower and heating plant, and its narrow ribbons of pavement do little to hide the region’s natural beauty.

To most outsiders, the houses lining the reserve’s nameless thoroughfare and meandering side lanes look reasonably well spaced and orderly. From an Anishinaabé perspective, however, the appearance of order belies the truth. The boxy houses, numbered and positioned in neat rows, show little regard for traditional conceptions of space or kinship. The reserve community is a product of 1960s relocation and government planning rather than Anishinaabé sensibilities about how and where people should live. Inside and out, houses on the
reserve vary in quality and style. The majority are prefabricated and
band-owned, differing mainly according to their era of construction
and level of upkeep. Scattered throughout the reserve are several
newer split-levels so identical that distinguishing characteristics—one
has a satellite dish, another a broken window on the lower level—
must be actively sought out. A few older homes with prominent logs
or stucco, though, do seem truly unique. With the temporary annual
exception of the week or two in April after the snow melts but before
the school’s Earth Day cleanup, the reserve’s roadsides and public
spaces are kept reasonably clean. Still, children’s playthings and aged
cars, kept around for their valuable spare parts, dot many yards. Dogs
of all possible descriptions wander the roads or relax sedately on
wooden porches.

The road goes on, up a precipitous hill and past the Gospel Believers—a small white church built by missionaries—and down into
another valley. Then up again and past an overgrown cemetery, mani-
ifestly syncretizing Christian and Ojibwe beliefs. On and up past several
clusters of homes until arriving at the powwow grounds and band
office in “downtown” Grassy Narrows (people I met from other First
Nations in the region often joked about Grassy’s unusually centralized
layout, with the band offices, multipurpose complex, and school all
within view of one another). The band office is a nondescript, brown
building with few windows and a high front counter that hides the
receptionist from view. Bulletin boards and booklet racks advertise
community events, employment opportunities, health information,
and other news. A row of offices for the chief and twelve councilors—
elected every two years—runs along the back wall. A break and meet-
ing room with couches, cushy chairs, a sink, and a coffee maker is
easily the building’s most inviting room. On the other side of a shim-
mering bay—part of Garden Lake—looms the community’s large
school. The Sakatcheway Anishinabe School is an attractive modern
facility, with separate elementary and high school wings, as well as a
cafeteria, gymnasium, and two fully equipped computer rooms.

Driving slowly with the safety of the reserve’s many pedestrians in
mind, the road comes to an end in J.B.’s parking lot. The only perma-
nent store in Grassy Narrows, J.B.’s also serves as the community’s
post office, gas station, and occasional social hub. A rectangular blue
building with one small, high window and a set of wooden stairs lead-
ing up to a heavy white door, J.B.’s looks like it should house a con-
struction office or warehouse. A neon “open” sign gives away the building’s true identity. Inside, soda coolers and displays of refrigerated and frozen foods line the back and left walls. An assortment of convenience-style packaged goods stocks the shelves in the center of the room. Since everything must be trucked up from town, prices at J.B.’s are high. Nevertheless, people pick up items as needs arise and children flock to J.B.’s to buy candy and soda pop. The store also carries a small assortment of fishing and camping supplies for the handful of tourists who drop in during the summer months. J.B.’s has one full-service gas pump and accepts all major credit cards. As the blockade at Grassy Narrows got underway, a large jar was placed on the checkout counter; its handwritten label read: “Donations for Blockade.”

J.B.’s rutted parking lot, situated as it is at the end of the reserve’s modest system of pavement, also functions as a turnaround. Beyond this, a gravel road intended to someday reach the Old Reserve is under construction. Anyone born at Grassy Narrows before the early 1960s spent his or her early years on the Old Reserve and invariably holds fond memories of life several miles upriver. Many Grassy Narrows residents—especially elders who lack the physical ability or means of transportation needed to reach the Old Reserve by boat, foot, or snowmobile—look forward to the road’s completion. They long to physically visit the sites where countless recollections and stories have taken them so many times before.

The Boreal Forest: Climate, Topography, and Ecosystems

Grassy Narrows lies between 50° and 51° north latitude and at 94° west longitude. Like the rest of northwestern Ontario, winters are cold, long, and dark. According to data from Environment Canada, the average January temperature hovers around -18° Celsius (or -1° Fahrenheit) and snowpack reaches several feet in a typical winter. Attaining the benchmark of -40° (where the Celsius and Fahrenheit scale meet) is not a rare occurrence. Lakes freeze hard enough by late December to permit vehicular traffic and the booms of breakup are not heard until the middle of April. Residents of the region celebrate spring. By mid-April, the snow disappears and temperatures rise gradually until they reach an average of 18° Celsius (65° Fahrenheit) in July. With an annual average around twenty-three inches, precipitation is
most abundant in June and July, but comes when it chooses. Pleasant by most any standards, summers here are treasured. Beginning in late August, the poplar leaves turn a dazzling shade of yellow. Snow begins to accumulate once again in late October or early November.

In the heart of the massive U-shaped Canadian Shield—the worn away roots of a Precambrian mountain range—northwestern Ontario’s topography offers little direction to water on its way to the sea. Although perceptibly hilly, the overall relief is low and drainage is poor. Water moves slowly to the Arctic Ocean, spending time in numerous lakes before passing through the Wabigoon, English, and Winnipeg rivers, resting in Lake Winnipeg, and eventually flowing on to Hudson Bay by way of the Nelson River. While the granitic rock of the Shield is billions of years old, surface features are the result of recent glaciations. Glaciers left their mark on this land just nine thousand years ago, and the quantity of exposed rock testifies to their scouring power.

When the glaciers retreated, they left only a thin layer of sandy topsoil behind. This fact, combined with the brevity of the northern growing season, makes agriculture impractical. When Euro-Canadian settlers first arrived, they thus found this land relatively undesirable (a bit of luck not shared by the Anishinaabe groups living in the fertile Rainy River Valley that straddles the United States border to the south and the rich Red River Valley to the west). Due to its lack of agricultural potential, non-Native Canadians have often perceived the boreal forest as a marginal wasteland. Of course, the indigenous peoples who inhabit the region see it very differently. A rich boreal forest ecosystem, dotted with countless bogs and lakes, rises from this rocky land. Poplars and conifers—spruce, firs, and pines—dominate the uplands, while wild rice and other hydrophilic plants thrive in low-lying areas. The closed boreal forest canopy allows little sunlight to penetrate the forest floor, limiting undergrowth in most locales. Even so, the slow rate of decomposition gives the forest a gnarled, enchanted appearance (Henry 2002).

Mammalian life flourishes in the boreal forest. The multitude of tracks each animal leaves behind makes the forest seem all the more alive. Looking down on the massive footprints of a timber wolf or lynx compels one to look just a little harder into the dense trees in search of eyes. The presence of innumerable black bears—at least when not deep in hibernation—also gives pause. Richard Nelson describes how for the Koyukon of Alaska, “a person moving through
nature—however wild, remote, even desolate the place may be—is never truly alone. The surroundings are aware, sensate, personified” (1983: 14). In northwestern Ontario, too, the world is a watchful, living one.

The noisiest and most visible creatures in the northern forest are birds. Although only present in summer, common loons are truly “common” here and can be so loud that they keep a light sleeper awake. The silhouettes of ravens, whiskey jacks (also known as gray jays or camp-robbers), bald eagles, and hawks hover overhead. Although few birds spend the winter here (around twenty species), the spring migration brings enough songbirds and waterfowl (around three hundred species) to make up for the seasonal lack (Henry 2002). White pelicans, great blue herons, snow and Canada geese, and white-throated sparrow are among those who make their summer residence in the boreal forest of northwestern Ontario.

Anishinaabe History: Movements in Time and Space

The story properly told, or the song properly sung, is true.
—Edward Chamberlin, If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories?

For thousands of years, indigenous peoples have lived in the forests of northwestern Ontario, surrounded by the harsh richness of the land. Yet, exactly when groups identifiable as Anishinaabe first arrived in the area remains a matter of contention. Today, both non-Native residents of northwestern Ontario and Anishinaabeg draw on their own interpretations of history in their attempts to establish the legitimacy of their respective claims to the land. In Indian County as in academia, the struggle to control the history of Native North America has been marked by heated battles. Who is privileged to write history? And how do those fortunate few choose to write it? In essence, these are questions about power and its consequences. History, it is often said, is written by the victors. But history can also tell us when power structures are contested and changing.

If it is true that the victors write history, what does it mean when peoples formerly considered marginal or oppressed begin imagining and writing their own pasts? In this context, what to accept as historical evidence becomes a critical question. The Delgamuukw decision set an important legal precedent in this regard. Delgamuukw began in
1990, when two British Columbia First Nations (the Gitxsan and Wet’suwet’en) argued before a provincial court that they retained title to their traditional lands because they had never signed a treaty with Canada. Eventually, the case reached Canada’s Supreme Court. While the Gitxsan and Wet’suwet’en did not officially win the case, the judgment passed down on December 11, 1997 solidly acknowledged First Nations’ oral tradition as a valid form of history. In *Delgamuukw*, “the court indicated that oral testimony and oral tradition merited considerable attention in law and that it should be taken into account when assessing First Nations cases” (Coates 2000: 91, see also BC Treaty Commission 1999). On the surface, *Delgamuukw* was about land claims, but at a deeper level it was about the meaning and making of history (Neu and Therrien 2003).

Exploring oral tradition as a form of history is a project that some historians and anthropologists have taken seriously for several decades now. Vansina (1985), for instance, points out that what we understand as history is culturally specific. Furthermore, other societies rarely share the Western fixation with uncovering or proving “objective” historical facts and linear sequences of events (Sahlins 1985; Comaroff and Comaroff 1992). Rather than searching for a factual picture of the past, non-Western peoples’ understandings of historical truth—as remembered through stories, landmarks, art, and numerous other mnemonic techniques—have more often involved translating past events to fit contemporary circumstances and meanings. In this context, oral history may be best seen “not as ‘evidence’ about the past but as a window on ways the past is culturally constituted and discussed” (Cruikshank 1990: 14). Rather than relegating history to the forgotten past, oral societies have found ways to keep it living and relevant. As Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor (1984: 24) poetically expounds,

> The Anishinaabeg did not have written histories; their world views were not linear narratives that started and stopped in manifest barriers. The tribal past lived as an event in visual memories and oratorical gestures; woodland identities turned on dreams and visions.

The historical consciousness Vizenor describes continues to inform how Anishinaabe people contemplate their own histories and how...
they make sense of the intersections between their own views of the past and those held by others.

Generally speaking, Anishinaabe and Western historical traditions agree that the people now occupying the Northwestern Great Lakes region have origins in more easterly parts of North America. The group of people today known interchangeably as Anishinaabe, Ojibwe, and Chippewa—together with closely related groups like the Potawatomi and Ottawa/Odawa—migrated from an eastern land of salt water, most probably near the mouth of the St. Lawrence River. Assigning a precise date to the commencement or completion of their westward journey remains impossible and, in any case, the movement did not occur all at once. Instead, “the migration was a process of extended-family visits to relatives, of invitations to live with more westerly groups, and of traveling in both directions many times” (Peers 1994: 28).

In both temporal and spatial terms, the journey from the east to the Lake Superior region was an extended one. Edward Benton-Banai, an Anishinaabe elder from Lac Court Oreilles, Wisconsin, shares the oral narratives he learned from his elders in The Mishomis Book (Benton-Banai 1988). According to Benton-Banai, the Algonquin people living along North America’s eastern shores long ago received prophecies warning them to move or face destruction. In response, they began a journey that would last for hundreds of years. Several stopping points marked the travelers’ route: Niagara Falls, Manitoulin Island, Sault St. Marie. The Anishinaabeg knew they were close to their final destination when the prophecy of finding wild rice (“the food that grows on the water”) was fulfilled near present-day Duluth, Minnesota. From there, they traveled the short distance east along the southern shore of Lake Superior until they arrived at Madeline Island.

William Warren, a mixed-blood nineteenth-century historian, also documented the migration story. In his History of the Ojibway People, Warren wrote:

Through close inquiry and study of their valued figurative traditions, we have discovered that the Ojibways have attained to their present geographical position, nearly in the centre of the North American continent, from the shores of the Atlantic Ocean, about the Gulf of the St. Lawrence River. (1984 [1885]: 76)
It is of some significance that Warren first learned of this “figurative tradition” while standing in a doorway, peering in on an initiation ceremony. Standing, as it were, in the doorway seems representative of Warren’s own life. Warren was the oldest son of Mary Cadotte, an Anishinaabe and French woman, and Lyman Warren, a fur-trader of English Mayflower descent. He was educated at an eastern boarding school, spoke fluent Anishinaabemowin, and wrote in a way that combined aspects of Anishinaabe and Euro–North American cultural traditions. Critically, Warren respected and made use of oral history in his written work (see Schenck 2007).

Although Warren reported seeing a copper medallion carved with a notch for every “lifetime” the Anishinaabeg had lived at Madeline Island, he does not attempt to provide a precise date for when the migration took place. Instead, he states simply that an elder told him it was “many strings of lives ago” (Warren 1984 [1885]: 79). Following Warren’s observation of eight notches on the medallion, and using fifty years to stand for one lifetime, Benton-Banai estimates that Madeline Island was settled around 1394 and that the first news of white contact—deduced from a figure with a hat carved on the copper disc—took place around 1544. Based on his knowledge of oral tradition as well as his consideration of what “the scholars” have to say, Benton-Banai believes that the migration started around 900 AD and took around five hundred years to complete (Benton-Banai 1988: 102).

Many non-Native scholars, on the other hand, date the Anishinaabe arrival at Madeline Island more than two hundred years later than Benton-Banai’s calculation (see Danziger 1979: 26–27). Whether or not Anishinaabeg lived at Lake Superior beginning around the fifteenth century or not until the seventeenth, it is likely that their expansion west and north out of the Lake Superior area reached its peak in the eighteenth century. Danziger (1979) estimates that by the early 1840s, Anishinaabe people occupied roughly the same areas as today—stretching from the northern section of Lakes Huron and Michigan northwest to the Lake Winnipeg region, with the Lake Superior area serving as a core. It also appears based on fur trade records that Anishinaabeg were already living on both sides of Lake Winnipeg by the end of the eighteenth century and were well established in that region by the early nineteenth (Peers 1994).

Historians have often cited conflict with the Iroquois and involvement in an expanding fur trade as the most important moti-

Contrary to the often expressed notion of the shrinkage of Indian groups due to European encroachment, the Chippewa in the long run, underwent great expansion through their contact with Europeans, largely due to the energetic participation in the fur trade.

As Anishinaabe people made inroads into formerly Dakota territory, warfare between the two groups escalated. Eighteenth-century conflicts in the areas that would later become Wisconsin and Minnesota are well documented. According to Nute (1941), around 1660, the Dakota were still in possession of Northern Minnesota. It was at this time that they began to be pushed out by arriving Anishinaabe groups. Long struggles over the territory followed, and the area is believed to have been under Anishinaabe control by 1750.

It is likely that Cree, rather than Dakota, bands were living in the Lake of the Woods area and the region immediately to the north prior to Anishinaabe arrival, but this displacement is scantily documented at best (Danziger 1979). According to Anishinaabeg in the region today, by the time the first white person—a seventeen-year-old Frenchman named Jacques De Noyan—arrived in the hilly lands surrounding Lake of the Woods in 1688, the Anishinaabe people were numerous and strong.

Does the date of Anishinaabe peoples’ arrival in their contemporary homelands really matter? In most cases, anthropologists focus on how history—as understood and believed—shapes culture in the present day. But for some people dates matter a great deal. Some non-Natives are quick to point out that the Anishinaabe arrived in northern Minnesota and the southern parts of northwestern Ontario at roughly the same time the first white men entered the area. In a compact book entitled The Indian Wars, for instance, Duane R. Lund pointedly notes that white explorers were in the vicinity of northern Minnesota in 1660, 1679, and 1732 (Lund 1995). Several non-Natives I spoke to in Kenora echoed his position. When they cite the “fact” that Anishinaabe people arrived in the region around the same
time as Europeans, these individuals deploy history in an attempt to validate continued non-Native control and extraction of the area’s natural resources.

Traditional Culture and Ways of Life

The northwestern Ontario Anishinaabeg are part of a larger cultural and linguistic tradition. Anishinaabemowin (the language spoken by Anishinaabe people) belongs to the Algonquian language family, which includes groups as diverse as the Cree (to the north), the Mi’kmaq (on the east coast), and the Blackfoot (of the high plains to the west). Among indigenous North Americans, the Anishinaabe were historically numerous and powerful. They remain today behind only the Cherokee and Navajo in terms of population. By early historic times, Anishinaabe people controlled a vast area of northeastern North America, straddling the region later divided by the United States–Canadian border.

Traditional Anishinaabe social organization was based on an informal tribal structure, with bands of three to four hundred comprising the basic social unit (Jenness 1977 [1932]). Individual families and groups retained a significant degree of autonomy and, as leaders in times of war or peace, chiefs governed based on influence and respect rather than institutionalized coercive force. Although politically independent, bands were closely socially integrated through marriage and the clan system. An exogamous and patrilineal clan system created kinship ties based on shared doodems (or totems). Clans were represented by familiar animals. Principal clans included crane, loon, fish, bear, marten, deer or moose, and bird (Warren 1984 [1885]; Benton-Banai 1988), but the relative prominence of each varied regionally.

Prior to European contact, the Anishinaabe lived a seminomadic lifestyle, moving according to seasonal patterns of resource availability. As a consequence of their frequent mobility, Anishinaabe material culture emphasized portability. Light yet durable and easy to locate throughout Anishinaabe territory, birchbark (wiigwaas) was used for baskets and other containers as well as for birchbark canoes (wiigwaasi-jimaan).
Birchbark was also essential for the construction of Anishinaabe dwellings. Dome shaped wigwams (\textit{wiigiwaaman}) were the most widespread structure. Wigwams varied in size, but were typically ten to twelve feet in diameter and of round or oval shape. Based on her 1917 fieldwork, Frances Densmore described the construction of one such lodge at White Earth, Minnesota (1979 [1929]: 23–24). In this case, fourteen ironwood poles were stuck into the ground, their ends twisted together overhead and tied with basswood bark. Additional ironwood poles horizontally encircled the structure, completing the wigwam’s frame. With the exception of one doorway—later hung with a heavy blanket—the walls were lined with woven bulrush mats and the top of the lodge covered with rolls of birchbark. In the frigid months of winter, a second layer of bulrush mats was added, and along with it a layer of insulating air between the wigwam’s two thin walls. A fire in the dwelling’s center provided the only heat. When the time came to relocate, families packed their mats and birchbark rolls, but left the wigwam’s frame standing. Difficult to transport yet easy to replace, a new frame was assembled at each location. Women, Densmore notes (1979 [1929]: 25), were in charge of wigwam construction.

In northwestern Ontario, the traditional Anishinaabe land-based seasonal subsistence cycle (or “annual round”) (see Densmore 1979 [1929]; Danziger 1979) did not differ dramatically from that observed in other parts of the North American subarctic. Through the chill of December, January, February, and March, Anishinaabe peoples’ primary subsistence activities included ice fishing and the trapping of beaver, otter, marten, wolf, lynx, and snowshoe hare. With families dispersed for the season, a lesser amount of opportunistic large game hunting also took place in the winter. Canoes provided the preferred means of transportation during the warm seasons, but once the lakes and rivers froze, most travel took place on foot; snowshoes (\textit{aagimag}) stand alongside the canoe as an important Anishinaabe innovation in transportation technology.

As winter relaxed its icy grip, people awaited the noisy arrival of untold numbers of ducks and geese. In late April and early May, waterfowl returning to boreal forest lakes or passing through along their migration routes to more northerly destinations offered a welcome source of food. As soon as the ice broke up, Anishinaabeg began fishing the open waters, often concentrating their earliest efforts on
rapids or known spawning zones. Birchbark was collected most inten-
sively in the springtime, when it peeled easily and cleanly from the
tree. And, although a marginal resource in northwestern Ontario due
to the scarcity of maple trees at this latitude, the collection of maple
sap for producing maple sugar was an important spring tradition for
Anishinaabe people to the south.

From its commencement in May until the waters turned icy with
fall, open water fishing remained a dominant activity. With many
families gathered at prime fishing locations, summer was also the most
social of the seasons. Late summer was a time of particular bounty. In
August, Anishinaabeg harvested the annual crop of wild rice
(*manoomin*) and picked several varieties of berries. Both resources,
together with dried meat and fish, were processed for storage in
underground caches. With fall’s arrival, hunting for migratory water-
fowl once again became a central activity. Large mammals—moose,
white-tailed deer, and bear—were hunted most intensively in the fall
months. As fall gave way to winter, families once again dispersed,
resuming trapping and continuing the cycle of land-based subsistence.

Transitions: A Mixed Economy

Like many indigenous peoples of the northern forests, the Anishi-
naabeg of northwestern Ontario shifted gradually from an exclusively
land-based to a mixed economy over the course of many decades,
facilitated in large part by their participation in the historic fur trade.
At Grassy Narrows, these changes accelerated dramatically in the
1960s and 1970s when relocation and mercury poisoning impacted
the community. In a few short years, a mixed economy emphasizing
land-based subsistence supplemented with a small amount of wage
labor and other sources of monetary income became a mixed econ-
omy in which—at least from a strictly material point of view—the
reverse was true.

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Anishi-
naabeg in the Canadian Shield region continued to move fluidly
according to the demands of the fur trade. Family and extended
family groups traveled with the seasons and trapping formed the heart
of economic life (Hickerson 1970). Over time, particular groups
became associated with specific trading posts operated by the Hudson
Bay Company, where they traded furs for firearms, steel traps, cloth, and other provisions each spring and often remained to fish during the summer months. One of these posts was located up the English River from present-day Grassy Narrows at Lac Seul and attracted a loose confederacy of Anishinaabe families (Shkilnyk 1985). At the time Treaty Three was signed in 1873, the Anishinaabeg gathered at Lac Seul were under the traditional hereditary leadership of Chief Sakatcheway. In the years following the treaty, the government established reserves, not to exceed one square mile for every five band members, for each group of signatory Indians. In 1882, the people associated with Lac Seul were divided into the two groups that became Grassy Narrows and the smaller Wabauskang First Nation. The two communities remain closely linked today through ties of family and friendship.

Through the first half of the twentieth century, people at Grassy Narrows sold furs and blueberries for cash and a handful participated in various types of wage labor, but the bulk of the community’s subsistence still came directly from the forest. A small Hudson Bay Company store operated on the Old Reserve, but its limited variety of items and high prices meant that Grassy Narrows residents purchased only basic supplies—hunting and trapping equipment, flour, sugar, and lard—regularly. Almost every family on the Old Reserve in this period planted a small plot of corn, squash, onions, and potatoes. Still, the people of Grassy Narrows remained highly mobile and spent most of their winters out on their traplines. Contacts with non-Native Canadian society were limited to semi-annual visits from Indian Health Service doctors and ceremonial Treaty Day visits from an Indian Agent and RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) officer (Shkilnyk 1985).

In the postwar boom of the late 1940s, Barney Lamm, a businessman from Minnesota, built a luxurious lodge on Ball Lake, located several miles upriver from Grassy Narrows. From that time on, men from the First Nation community participated seasonally in the burgeoning tourism industry, working as fishing guides for wealthy anglers. The construction of Jones Road in the late 1950s and government-mandated relocation in the early 1960s ushered in more dramatic changes. Grassy Narrows residents now had access to a wide variety of desirable commodities. As chapter 3 describes in more detail, scientists detected methyl mercury in the English-Wabigoon
Figure 1.1. Anishinaabe children pose with blueberries for sale in Kenora, circa 1912. Photo by C. G. Linde. Used with permission of the Minnesota Historical Society.

River system in 1970. The impacts of relocation and mercury poisoning compounded one another. After relocation, the community's transition from a relatively independent, subsistence livelihood to participation in the wider wage labor system had accelerated quickly. Many citizens of Grassy Narrows, now working as commercial fishermen or fishing guides, depended upon the river more than ever before for their living. These economic opportunities collapsed after the discovery of mercury in the river.

By 1977, the community was economically dependent upon steadily increasing transfer payments from the Canadian government, with 37.2 percent of all income deriving from unearned sources and the government functioning as the community's principal employer (Shkilnyk 1985: 148). A report published by the University of Manitoba's Natural Resources Institute the same year (Kelly et al. 1977) similarly listed band administration as Grassy Narrows' most profitable occupation. The socioeconomic situation has improved little over the past thirty years. Unemployment, underemployment, and welfare dependency remain high. On welfare “paydays,” the band
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Office bustles with activity as people claim their checks, supermarkets in Kenora regularly sell out of basic supplies, and some residents dread the disruptive drinking parties they know will follow.

From an economic standpoint, the situation at Grassy Narrows bears little resemblance to the traditional ideal, yet First Nation residents’ land-based subsistence activities differ more in quantity than in quality from the pattern described here. Although fewer people today engage in land-based subsistence activities and those that do tend to engage in them less often, almost every family group includes someone who hunts, fishes, and/or traps at least occasionally. Many community members continue to gather each season’s characteristic wild resources despite the social and economic upheavals of the past fifty years. Furthermore, those who are unable to participate regularly in land-based subsistence speak of the community members responsible for keeping these traditions alive with genuine respect.

At Grassy Narrows today, trapping remains the dominant cold-season subsistence activity, although fishing also takes place during the winter. Grassy Narrows trappers hold thirty-one registered traplines scattered throughout the Traditional Land Use Area that surrounds the community. Travel to and within the trapline almost always occurs by snowmobile and trips are usually completed in one day, although a few trappers maintain cabins that make longer stays feasible. In addition to registered trapline holders, official “assistants” and younger relatives frequently accompany trappers in order to develop their own skills. While the majority of the community’s trappers learned their skills by observing and assisting as youth, several Grassy Narrows residents have become involved in trapping more recently with help from Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources training courses.

The most commonly sought furbearers include beaver—one of the only species trapped for its fur that Grassy Narrows residents also prize as a food source—and members of the weasel family: pine marten, river otter, fisher, mink, and wolverine. Red fox, lynx, wolf, and muskrat are also trapped periodically. Trapping provides supplementary income for many men and women at Grassy. Four times a year, the North American Fur Auction comes to Kenora to purchase furs from the region’s trappers. Years ago, high fur prices meant that a skilled trapper could support a family by trapping alone. During my time at Grassy Narrows, a trapper who worked hard and had a bit of
luck could still secure as much, I was told, as $8,000 over the course of a winter.

Despite constant anxiety about mercury and other toxic substances in the English-Wabigoon River system, fishing is enjoyed by Grassy Narrows residents of all ages. Walleye are famously abundant in northwestern Ontario’s waters. Men, women, and children alike fish with rod and reel (this usually means jigging from boats or casting from the rocky shoreline with inexpensive jigheads and rubber lures) and a few men gather to snare fish with wire during the spring spawning season. Commercial fishing remains insignificant due to restrictions in place since the mercury contamination of the 1970s, but tourism has rebounded to some degree and a few dozen men—as well as a couple women—from Grassy find seasonal work as fishing guides.

In late summer, people eagerly await the ripening of two important wild foods: wild rice and blueberries. The availability of these resources varies according to weather conditions. Additionally, wild rice remains at the mercy of the dams that now constrain the English-Wabigoon River system; if water levels are raised while the rice is still in its vulnerable floating leaf stage, an entire harvest can be damaged beyond recovery. If, however, conditions have been favorable, both crops are astoundingly rich. Harvesting wild rice requires access to a boat and considerable skill, but a handful of Grassy Narrows residents collect the aquatic grain each year and share the products of their labor widely. Abundant and accessible, hundreds of First Nation residents take part in the seasonal harvest of wild blueberries.

In the fall—and to a lesser extent throughout winter and into early spring—First Nation members hunt moose and white-tailed deer by firearm. Most frequently, two or three people set out together in the morning or evening, hunting with the aid of a boat or vehicle for transportation. Meat from these large animals is frozen for consumption throughout the year. In both fall and spring, migratory waterfowl are also harvested.

Several factors now combine to limit First Nation members’ participation in land-based subsistence. Children, for one thing, must remain close to school. Although I heard of a few parents who took their children out of school for a land-based subsistence event they deemed important, on no occasion did this extend beyond a day or two. Travel into the bush also requires transportation in the form of a snowmobile, boat, or truck as well as the gas to get it there. This
requires money. As a paradoxical corollary of the contemporary mixed economy, the same adults who hold regular jobs are most able to afford such travel yet are often too busy with other demands to undertake it.

**Land-Based Subsistence in the Twenty-First Century: Culture, Identity, and Politics**

Although foods harvested from the bush are a valued part of Grassy Narrows residents’ diet, for most people they are a caloric supplement rather than a subsistence base. Today, people at Grassy purchase the majority of their provisions in the supermarkets of Kenora. Yet, it would be highly erroneous to assume that wild foods are inconsequential because they provide only a small percentage of First Nation members’ caloric intake. For some families in certain parts of the year wild meat, fish, rice, and berries complete many meals. Even more important, however, is the relationship between the harvest and consumption of wild foods and Anishinaabe cultural identity. For many people at Grassy Narrows, land-based subsistence is much more than simply a source of livelihood; it is deeply symbolic of a way of life.

Land-based subsistence is the quintessential aspect of northern Natives’ cultural lives. As Paul Nadasdy (2003: 63) puts it, “to First Nations people living in the Arctic and Subarctic, hunting is synonymous with life itself.” Kirk Dombrowski (2001: chapter 4) similarly points out that subsistence is both an identity and a livelihood; it is both a way of life and a way to live. In the past, the truth of these statements was quite literal. While economic patterns have shifted considerably, indigenous peoples in the north continue to depend—to varying degrees—on hunting for physical as well as psychological sustenance. Nadasdy (2003: 64–65) goes on to describe how for Kluane people in the southwest Yukon, “[hunting] has been the fundamental organizing principle of their culture, structuring and informing every aspect of their entire way of life.” Despite the complex transitions of recent years, this statement rings true at Grassy Narrows.

Like other Native northerners, residents of Grassy Narrows hold wild foods—things like moose meat, venison, beaver, walleye, wild rice, and blueberries—in higher regard than the commodities available for purchase in town (see Wenzel 1991: 137–38 and
Nadasdy 2003: 75–76). Not only do they consider such items healthier, but the acts of gathering and consuming wild foods are also important markers of a contemporary Indian identity. By gathering berries and rice and by hunting, fishing, and trapping, people at Grassy Narrows connect to their Anishinaabe heritage. As respected harvester Andy “Shoon” Keewatin put it in the summer of 2004, these things “remind them who they are.” For Shoon and others at Grassy, a life of land-based subsistence, the cultural identity that accompanies it, and the forest that enables it cannot be bought or sold.

Land-based subsistence helps construct an affirmative Anishinaabe identity. It gives Anishinaabe people a way to define themselves that breaks free of mainstream society’s pessimistic comparisons and categorizations. The devastating poverty of Canada’s First Nations has been well documented (e.g., York 1990), even if not fully grasped by the general Canadian public. Although they do lament the blatant economic disparities that divide them from their Euro-Canadian neighbors, many Anishinaabeg feel that their cultural, spiritual, and social richness far outweighs their material poverty. Keeping culturally distinct patterns of land-based subsistence alive lies at the core of this perceived wealth. For Anishinaabe people in northwestern Ontario, firsthand experience with environmental degradation—most unforgettably the discharge of mercury into the English-Wabigoon River system—instilled a harsh lesson: If the environment becomes further degraded, traditional land-based subsistence and the rich set of cultural beliefs and practices that go along with it are likely to cease.

In fact, Grassy Narrows residents’ reactions to the health risks associated with toxins in the environment also highlight the symbolic significance of land-based subsistence. Mercury contamination and, more recently, the aerial spraying of herbicides (a standard step in the industrial forest regeneration process) have led many First Nation members to worry about the safety of consuming the wild foods they harvest. Judy DaSilva—a devoted anti-clearcutting activist and mother of five young children—once expressed her concerns about contaminants at a public forum. An outsider attending the event suggested a simple solution: Why, he asked, didn’t they simply stop eating wild foods? Judy had been taken aback. Reflecting on this exchange, she emphatically told me, “It’s not just something you quit. It’s not just food for us; it’s spiritual.”
In addition to bolstering Grassy Narrows residents’ feelings about their own culture and cultural identity, their practice of land-based subsistence also makes a strong statement to the outside world. It marks Grassy Narrows First Nation as a culturally and ethnically distinct entity, with unique practices, institutions, and associated rights. Activists at Grassy Narrows frequently speak of the need to “assert their rights.” But what do they mean? How do they translate abstract political declarations into on-the-ground actions? Most often, such assertions take the form of hunting, fishing, and other land-based subsistence pursuits within the Grassy Narrows Traditional Land Use Area. Based on the guarantees of Treaty Three, Anishinaabe people have the legal right to harvest resources for their own subsistence throughout the region even when these activities may be illegal for northwestern Ontario’s non-Native population. They possess, for instance, the right to hunt outside of Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources sanctioned seasons, are not required to obey bag limits, and are able to hunt and fish without a license. Natives are also permitted to use some harvesting techniques not permissible for the general public.

In recent years, the people of Grassy Narrows have been able to hunt, fish, and trap with little harassment. Throughout much of the twentieth century, however, Anishinaabeg in the Kenora district were frequently prosecuted for carrying out these activities (Phelan 2001). As Nesper (2002) explains regarding the “violating” behavior of Native people in northern Wisconsin, the denial of these basic rights led many to see land-based subsistence as a conscious declaration of the rights they possess by virtue of their distinctive indigenous cultural, historical, and legal identity.7 Hunting, fishing, and gathering—as components of an economic mode of production—have always been cultural activities. Today, however, these practices have also become strikingly self-conscious and deeply political. For Anishinaabeg in the twenty-first century, engaging in land-based subsistence activities has become an inescapably political act.

“Culture,” Justice Thomas Berger (1991: 139) writes, “must have a material basis. This gives the idea of Native self-determination and the subsistence culture on which it depends a compelling urgency among the peoples of the Arctic and sub-Arctic.” For the Grassy Narrows blockaders, preserving the land has become a
precondition for the preservation of Anishinaabe cultural identity; the presence of viable ecosystems with healthy plant and animal populations and a rich diversity of species is taken as a prerequisite for the survival of land-based subsistence culture. It is the natural environment of Grassy Narrows’ Traditional Land Use Area that provides the First Nation’s residents with the material foundation Berger prescribes. In this context, Grassy Narrows activists understand protecting the land as a right, closely linked to the safeguarding of their treaty and Aboriginal rights. It is to this topic that we now turn.