

# Building a Relationship with the People of McClelland



By Phillip Meintzer



*Driving from Fort McMurray to Fort McKay helped provide perspective on the scale of destruction that surrounds residents of Fort McKay on all sides.*

Photo © P. Meintzer

**Note from the author:** In early September 2023, AWA staff spent three days in the Fort McMurray area to visit the McClelland Lake Wetland Complex and to meet with people who have ties to the region. This article focuses on our visit to Fort McKay to meet Indigenous Elder Barb Faichney. To avoid any unwanted or potentially harmful mischaracterization of information, all comments and statements attributed to Barb Faichney within this article have been reviewed and approved by Barb herself. AWA also offered a gift of ceremonial tobacco and a small honorarium to Barb in exchange for her time and her knowledge. We do not want to risk repeating the harms of colonial, extractive behaviour in the work that we do. It should also be noted that I am forever grateful for Barb's openness to meeting and sharing her knowledge with us. Nothing has inspired me in my work nearly as much as seeing McClelland in person and our visit with Barb in Fort McKay.

The morning had an ominous feeling about it as we drove through mist mixed with wildfire smoke blowing in from the north. We — myself and colleague Amy Tucker — were heading to visit an Indigenous elder in Fort McKay, home to approximately 800 community members of mixed Dene, Cree and Métis descent. It's roughly a 45-minute drive from Fort McMurray, past numerous oil sands mines, including Syncrude's Mildred Lake mine and Suncor's Base Plant.

It's hardly enough to say that Fort McKay is sandwiched between mines. It is surrounded on all sides. An ongoing resistance against a ceaseless colonial siege.

About 60 kilometres north of the community is the McClelland Lake Wetland Complex, the main reason for our trip. McClelland's patterned fen alone is one of Alberta's greatest ecological treasures, taking around eight to 11 thousand years to form, and the area stores millions of tonnes of carbon, which is crucial for mitigating the worst impacts of climate change. The expansion of Suncor's Fort Hills oil sands

mine — scheduled to begin in 2025 — risks ruining it all. Since joining AWA back in May 2021, I have been working to try and protect the complex. AWA has been doing so as an organization since the early 1990s, if not earlier.

A hot asphalt-like smell, similar to when roadwork is being done, wafted through the car vents during the drive along the highway. We hit the air recirculation button on our car's dashboard, hoping to minimise the smell, and our exposure to whatever was causing it. For those who live in the area, the smell is unavoidable and permeates everything.

Fort McKay is not a large place, but that didn't prevent Amy and I from getting lost while trying to find the home of Barbara Faichney. Even after calling Barb for more detailed directions, I still had to ask an on-duty lawn care worker if they could point us the right way. By chance, this worker happened to be one of Barb's grandchildren. We arrived at Barb's front doorstep just before 10:30 a.m.

My hope for this meeting was to use

AWA's public profile and reputation to help support and amplify the voices of those who have been silenced from speaking up until now. Voices such as Barb's. AWA as an organisation may be trying to protect McClelland for its ecological importance, but we also need to support the people who have a direct connection to it and consider McClelland part of their home.

Barb was waiting for us outside. She welcomed us into her kitchen and served us coffee as we introduced ourselves and the work we do on behalf of AWA. Other than a few questions I had prepared, we came into this meeting with no formal plan for how we wanted the conversation to go. We wanted to provide Barb the space to share any stories or information that she felt were relevant or helpful to our campaign. The conversation flowed straight into an informal discussion of Barb's life, her childhood spent in the vicinity of McClelland Lake, her family's connection to the land, and her fears about the potential impacts of the Fort Hills mine expansion.

Barb was born at St. Gabriel's Hospital in Fort McMurray in 1954, and she grew up at a place she calls their "Little Red House" along Horse Creek, near Bitumount, one of the earliest sites where oil sands mining was first attempted. Barb's father was born in Wabasca, he was a trapper, and he also worked at a salt plant nearby. Her grandpa Jim was a Scottish settler who ran the local Hudson's Bay Company trading post. Her mom's parents were both trappers as well. Barb told us that she "lived in the bush," until she was around 15 years old. The time she spent around McClelland Lake during her childhood was "nice, peaceful, and quiet." In 1961, when Barb was seven years old, her parents were forced to send her to the Indian Day School in Fort McKay, otherwise they would be sent to jail (or so they were threatened). She doesn't know who ordered her parents to do this, but she suspects it may have been the Indian Agent for the area at that time.



Barb shared many family stories and photos with us during our visit so that we could better understand her connection to the region including the McClelland Lake Wetland Complex. Photo © P. Meintzer

One of my first questions for Barb was whether Indigenous Peoples in the area use a different name to refer to McClelland, as opposed to the commonly used colonial name. My hope was to update the terminology we have been using, partly to bring focus on the Indigenous history in the region, but also because McClelland Lake Wetland Complex doesn't really roll off the tongue easily. Barb said that everyone she knows has always called it McClelland, and that there's no other name she is aware of. I wonder whether it's just another piece of cultural history that has been lost or forcibly erased since first contact with European settlers.

Barb recalls memories of wildlife at McClelland Lake, especially birds, such as sandhill cranes, whooping cranes, and blue herons. She is familiar with a particular family of blue herons which she says always return to the same nesting spot, and she feels a need to protect them. She remembers seeing caribou on occasion, although they were usually further north where there is more lichen, and she has even seen buffalo tracks near the lake at times. Her family would hunt moose, rabbit, and beaver as their main source of diet, although Barb tells us that she never liked eating beaver.

Commercial-scale production from Alberta's oil sands region didn't begin in earnest until around 1967, which means that throughout Barb's life she has witnessed the cumulative impacts of development firsthand. She said that she remembers a time when some company (either Petro-Canada or Suncor) put up a gate blocking access to her family's trapline. But she wasn't going to let a gate stop her. "The oil companies say that the gates are for our protection, but what are they protecting us from? Themselves?"

Over the years she has noticed many changes in the presence and behaviour of wildlife in the area. "Rats [muskrats] used to be everywhere, and now there's none." She now sees pelicans on McClelland Lake when there never used to be any in the area. "There have always been bears around McClelland, but there are less and less everywhere these days" and that "it's harder to eat bear nowadays because they are often full of tapeworms." Barb thinks that this is because the bears are eating human

garbage which may be carrying parasites. The water has also changed over the years. She describes McClelland Lake as being in the middle of a teacup with destruction all around, where everything flows down into the middle. She remembers her father telling their family that they should stop drinking from McClelland Lake in the early 1980s, even if it was boiled. They felt their water supply was no longer safe.

At one point, Barb was the only remaining trapline holder in the McClelland area. It was her grandfather's trapline originally, trapline #2137 she tells us, but she signed it over to her two brothers. Her brothers eventually made a deal with the McClelland Lake Lodge to sell the trapline to them, but Barb feels that they were never adequately compensated for this transaction. The McClelland Lake Lodge is an oil sands work camp, which was recently sold again by Civeo, a workplace accommodations company, to Ero Copper Corp., a mining company, for a sum of \$36 million.

Barb stresses to us that the entirety of the McClelland Lake Wetland Complex is connected (from an ecological stance, by groundwater), and that McClelland is also connected to all the surrounding area. She told us about an area within the patterned fen, an important nesting site for ducks, which sits right next to the part of the fen destined for mining. It will likely be destroyed by the activity. She also remembers a place for cranberry picking known as "Berry Hill," which used to be covered by a thick blanket of berries. It's now Suncor's Fort Hills open-pit mine. "It made me cry," Barb says about the loss of Berry Hill. McClelland, she says, is the "land we were raised on, and now Suncor is going in and destroying it."

Barb feels most people in the community fear Suncor because the mining giant has the wealth and resources to hire "better lawyers" to make sure these sorts of projects get pushed through. This — in a way — mimics my own experience with trying to find wetland experts who were willing and able to review Suncor's operational plan for AWA. Most of the people I contacted had to decline because of conflicts of interest with work they had done (or were planning to do) for energy companies like Suncor. Barb feels like most of her community are





*Even though the wetland complex is still relatively undisturbed, Barb's family stopped drinking from the lake in the early 1980s due to fears over contamination from the surrounding industrial development. Photo © P. Meintzer*

pro-Suncor, or at least it comes off that way. “I don't think that people want to ruffle any tail feathers,” she tells us. “Everyone just wants to stay quiet and get by, but what will they [Suncor] do to me if I speak out?” Barb tells us that now, in her older age, she no longer relies on Suncor, and she feels that she can now speak out more freely.

She acknowledged that many people rely on the company for employment, and to support themselves or their family. It's a difficult reality as industry is the reason why they can no longer feed themselves in the first place — corporations (and the colonial governments that enable them) have harmed the environment and prevented communities from living traditionally, which forces them into taking wage labour jobs offered by the extractive industries in the area.

Barb said that since Suncor's operational plan, which details how the company plans to expand its mining operation into McClelland, was approved last September, Suncor no longer seems to be receptive to the concerns or needs of the Indigenous communities. Community members participated (and continue to participate) on the sustainability committee,

established by Suncor to inform the development of the operational plan with western science and Indigenous Traditional Knowledge. There have been much fewer meetings in the past year than in prior years, Barb says. Suncor still has many commitments it needs to fulfill, such as wildlife monitoring based on community-suggested indicators, but Barb says that it feels like Suncor is “backing away from these commitments” now that they have their AER approval. “You can't just stop monitoring wildlife,” Barb explains.

The community representatives on the sustainability committee feel that Suncor is not being transparent with its decisions or actions, and that communities always find out afterwards. She doesn't believe that the Suncor staff are bad people, they're just following orders down the chain of command. “Suncor [staff] aren't dumb, they just don't care about the environment at all.” Barb feels that community concerns haven't been acknowledged in a meaningful way, and that Suncor has continually mischaracterized her input to suit their needs. She also told us that she thinks AWA made the correct decision by not participating on the sustainability

committee from the start. She is glad that there is someone like us who is being outspoken and critical from the outside.

“Everything we grew up with has been damaged [by industry],” Barb tells us. Once the digging starts for the construction of the underground cut-off wall for the Fort Hills expansion, Barb believes that we will see the impacts immediately. “All the wetlands all over the area are linked together and linked to that lake. You cannot cut off one area from another without causing harm.”

Our visit to Fort McKay finished with a couple of short on-camera interviews between Barb and Amy, and afterwards we exchanged our sincere thanks, said our goodbyes, and travelled back to Fort McMurray. The experience was a powerful reminder that I have the luxury of doing this work while sitting at home at my desk from my computer in Calgary, while other people such as Barb — and the Indigenous communities directly impacted by these mines — are not so lucky. This has meant that I'm no longer just fighting to protect some abstract idea of intact wilderness in northern Alberta, I'm trying to ensure that Barb (and others) can always return to the place they call home. 🍄