

Indigenous Renewable Energy Literature Review

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Abstract

A narrative that is starting to emerge in both Indigenous studies and climate change discussions is renewable energy projects developed by or with indigenous groups. This is a narrative used by Indigenous groups, environmental organizations, governments and individuals. As the phenomenon continues to gather momentum in Canada more and more literature has been published on various aspects of such projects. This literature review has been compiled in an effort to add to the existing knowledge surrounding these projects by creating a preliminary snapshot of the existing literature.

Introduction

This review of existing literature is not meant to be considered complete, comprehensive or exhaustive. It is merely meant as an introduction to the main locales of existing research. Intention was given to seeking out indigenous authors and groups writing about their own experiences; however, in the interests of reviewing the literature as it currently stands non-Indigenous sources were included. While the focus was on Canadian examples and experiences, Bargh (2010, 2012) and Dreveskracht (2011) describe contexts in New Zealand and the United States, respectively.

There are five models for indigenous involvement in renewable energy projects (Henderson, 2013). Grievance settlement projects are when a project has already been built without the fair participation of indigenous people who then decide to fight for a settlement which allocates some benefits to them. There is also renewable energy (wind, water or solar) generation projects which are built on reserve land, as well as projects built on traditional territory that a specific indigenous group has claims to. There are also transmission projects on traditional land, such as building power lines, as well as investment projects (Henderson, 2013). Each of these types of projects has different considerations and outcomes. This review is limited in scope to renewable energy generation projects built on reserve land or traditional territories.

Case Studies

The T'sou-ke Nation in B.C. has become a well-known example of a renewable energy project developed by a First Nation. In 2007 the T'Sou-ke Nation conducted a community consultation

that articulated the goals of energy, economic and food self-sufficiency. (T'Sou-ke Nation, 2016). As part of this vision, a plan for energy efficiency, solar (PV) panels, and solar water heating systems was implemented (Moore, 2013). This project has been studied by many as a case study of indigenous energy (Dreveskracht, 2011; Moore, 2013; Ozog, 2012). Ozog (2012) specifically studied the partnership between T'Sou-ke and the Skidegate Nation. As a result of establishing themselves as a leader in indigenous energy projects, T'Sou-ke acted as a consulting partner for Skidegate as they explored an energy project of their own. As a result of this partnership Skidegate adopted the energy efficiency and solar heating aspects of the T'Sou-ke project, but not the PV installation (Ozog, 2012).

Another project that emerged multiple times in the literature was the Hupacasath Nation. Chief Judith Sayers describes her experience, in Henderson (2013), of building a micro-hydro project as an economic development strategy. Chief Sayers highlights the importance of consulting with the community and remaining flexible but driven (Kekinusuqs, 2005).

In the area of wind projects, Rodman (2013) presents a detailed case study of how a proposed wind project, and renewable energy more generally, is understood by the people of the Gitxaala Nation in Northern B.C. Her findings included an analysis of how past relationships to government, environmental groups and the proposed Northern Gateway Pipeline in the area impacted perceptions of offshore wind. Her findings were that all projects, whether fossil fuel or wind, were evaluated with the same criteria of possible current and future impact on community.

Henderson (2013) provides an extensive collection of case studies throughout his book, *Aboriginal Power*. A map of projects has also been created at <https://indigenousenergy.ca/map/> (Lowan-Trudeau, & Rathnavalu, n.d.).

Motivation for the Projects

A rationale for developing renewable energy projects that emerged from multiple sources was the desire for economic development. Henderson (2013) articulates that economic development of the Nation(s) involved must be an integral part of any project undertaken. Community economic development (CED) was the driving motivation behind the Hupacasath micro-hydro project (Kekinusuqs, 2005). The idea of economic development increasing sovereignty also arose from the literature (Jaffar, 2015; Dreveskracht, 2011). A related concept to economic development was reducing dependency on fossil fuels. This was especially common in northern contexts, where diesel is the source of most heat and electricity but is very expensive and a heavy pollutant (Arriaga, Cañizares, & Kazerani, 2013; Jaffar, 2015; Rezaei & Dowlatabadi, 2015).

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The other key motivation expressed by communities pursuing these projects was a desire to live, and get/use energy, in a way that aligned with values and respect for the environment (Jaffar, 2015; Wildcat, 2009). James Cowpar describes that “it’s about respecting Mother Earth” (as quoted in Ozog, 2012, p. 3).

Recommendations

In all of the examples of successful projects there was a clear team of people dedicated to the project. Projects take time and commitment to come to completion. The hydro project in Hupacasath was “a lesson in creativity and perseverance that lasted nearly two years” (Kekinusuqs, 2005). For Shaunna Morgan, “even when leadership changes at least one person needs to remain constant to champion the project through the changes” (as cited in Henderson, 2013, p. 34). This commitment ensures that projects can make it through the many stages of a project, from idea to reality.

Just as important as having commitment is being able to find funding for the project. Judith Sayers shares that “the hardest thing with the China Creek Hydro Project was finding the money to make it all happen” (as cited in Henderson, 2013, p. 70). Denise Restoule agrees that the Okikendawt Hydroelectric Project would not have been possible without the funding support from the Ontario government (as cited in Henderson, 2013). A big obstacle for the Gitxaala wind project is an inability to navigate the regulations and secure funding for their project (Rodman, 2013).

The most important recommendation to emerge from the literature was that renewable energy should not be a replication of old energy models. Renewable energy is a chance to have meaningful participation and ownership from indigenous peoples who have been excluded for so long (Henderson, 2013; Rodman, 2013). Project involvement must move beyond consultation to a “respectful, comprehensive, proactive, interactive, resourced and substantive community engagement process” (Henderson, 2013, p. 104).

Renewable energy has the potential to support community economic development, sovereignty, energy independence and create a foundation for a new relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada. There is still much work to be done, but momentum is building behind these projects as the future of Indigenous energy.

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