

Poplar River First Nation

1. Observed Changes

Poplar River community members described changes in weather, ice, winter roads, trails, and wildlife within and surrounding the community in recent decades.

Seasonal Changes in Weather

Winter seasons in Poplar River are warmer and shorter than they were last decade. Elders indicated that the wind now brings in warm air from east, rather than cold air from the north as it did in past winters. Snow comes later in the season than it did in the past and big snowstorms are less frequent. Snowfall and accumulation patterns have also changed. Fall and spring seasons are longer, warmer, and wetter. Summers are hot and hazy. Extreme weather events such as wind and thunderstorms now happen with a greater intensity and frequency than in the past.

Water bodies

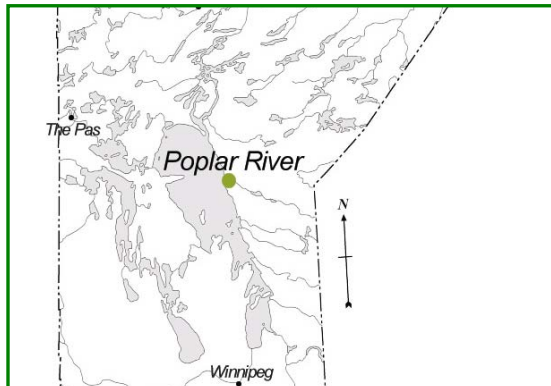
Major water bodies in and around the community freeze up later and thaw earlier than they did in the past. Water levels fluctuate more dramatically, and periods of high and fast flowing water are now common. In the winter, the ice is not as thick as it was in past decades, and big cracks now form in the ice. Further, the river shorelines are slushy. For the first time this year, community members are spotting sections of open water in the middle of the river. Weaver Lake typically freezes in December, but this year, it still had not frozen by February.

Winter Roads

There are concerns in Poplar River First Nation regarding winter road conditions. In the past, winter roads were stronger since they had a thick layer of blue ice (the 'strong ice' that forms early in the season on the bottom) underneath the white ice (the 'weaker ice'). In recent years, the blue ice is thin and the majority of ice that forms is white. Since the ratio of blue ice to white ice has changed, the ice needs to be thicker in order to be sufficiently strong to withstand the weight of loaded trucks. Since the winters are warmer, it takes a longer period of time for conditions to be suitable. This situation is compounded by areas of muskeg that freeze very late in the season (or not at all). In recent years, deep slush is accumulating on the surface of winter roads and other frozen water bodies, causing further problems.

Plants and Animals

Community members are noticing changes in plants and animals around Poplar River. Growth of trees has diminished. For example, trees such as poplar and spruce are not as big as they used to be. Additionally, intense summer heat causes leaves to brown and berries to dry out and wither before they have the chance to ripen. There are also fewer flowering plants.



Quick Facts

On-Reserve Population: 1033
Total Population: 1318

Reserve Area: 1537.8 Hectares

Language: Ojibway and English.

Winter Road Network: From north to south
Poplar River - Berens - Bloodvein - Pine Dock

Length: 185 km

Other local Networks:
A barge operates on Lake Winnipeg from
Selkirk to Bloodvein, Berens, and Poplar
River
Various trapper trails

Winter Activities: Snowmobiling, sliding,
skating, hockey, winter carnival, camp at
Weaver Lake, volleyball.

Summer Activities: Feasts, hunting, fishing
(commercial and sustenance), swimming,
camp at Weaver Lake, volleyball.

Users of the Winter Road:
Supply trucks (food, furniture, housing),
community members in vehicles, fuel tankers,
and band employees for Elder's lodge,
school, band office etc.

Community Amenities: Mitasosipe Trading
Post, Northern Store, Negginan Fishing
Station, Sara's Diner, Sagatay Lodging,
Upriver Convenience Store.

Developments
Hydro control of L. Winnipeg from dam at
Grand Rapids



Image 1: Poplar River First Nation

Many mammals (e.g. rabbits, moose, and minks) are not as plentiful as they used to be, and some (e.g. marten) are noticeably smaller. Some birds such as the white snowbird (ptarmigan) that were plentiful in the past are no longer found at all. Conversely, some mammals (such as wolves and bears) have increased in number, and others (e.g. skunk) are entirely new to the area. Fishermen indicated that quality and size of the local fish has diminished. Fish are sometimes seen in ditches. Beaver hair is now shorter and the pelt has less market value.

2. Perceived Causes

Community members attributed the changes that they are observing to a number of factors. For example, some Elders indicated that changes in the weather and ice conditions are part of a natural cycle during which the climate will get warmer for a number of years, and eventually return to normal. Other individuals attribute the warmer weather and changes in the ice conditions and plants and animals to 'climate change' due to the release of greenhouse gases from pollution in the south. Natural disasters were also blamed for changes in plants and animals. Many individuals also believe that water bodies aren't freezing due to high water levels and fast-flowing currents (related to control by Manitoba Hydro and possibly new input from Devil's Lake).

3. Roles and Impacts of Observed Changes

Community members described a significant economic, social, financial, and physical role for the winter road, trails, and other frozen water in and around Poplar River. As a result, some of the changes that they are observing are affecting their day-to-day lives.

Social / Cultural

The winter road is an important transportation link, allowing individuals to travel outside of their community. The winter road is used to visit with friends and family, to participate in neighbouring community events (e.g. bingo), and to shop in bigger centres. The church Minister also uses the winter road to travel between Poplar River and two other communities (Berens and Bloodvein) that he services. In years when the winter road season is unpredictable, short, and unreliable, all of these activities are affected.

Other trails (i.e. non-winter road routes) and frozen water bodies within the community are also important as they

enable individuals to participate in recreational activities (e.g. ice fishing, fishing derbies, skating, hockey, snowmobiling, winter carnival). Slushy conditions on the river, weak ice, and open water decreases opportunities for community members to participate in these winter activities.

Financial role

The price of food, gasoline, and other supplies within the community is much higher in Poplar River than it is in communities connected by all-weather roads. Low-income community members are particularly affected by high prices. As a result, operation of the winter road is essential in order to help offset these high prices. For example, local businesses are able to transport goods and fuel into the community at affordable prices. Additionally, community members are able to use the winter road to travel to Winnipeg to purchase and stock food and goods for themselves. This is particularly important during winter months when the barge is not operating, since goods must otherwise be transported by air cargo.

Non-winter road trails around Poplar River are used by community members to access trap-lines, hunting grounds, and ice-fishing areas. These activities all serve an important financial role since they help community members to offset the high cost of food and goods. In warm years when the alternative routes and fishing areas are not reliable (i.e. when the ice is too thin, there is too much slush, and travel is too slow), these activities are negatively impacted. Indeed, since 1997, it has not been possible to fish commercially in the in the wintertime. Algae in Lake Winnipeg has also increased considerably in recent years and this is now causing concern for fishermen in the summertime.



Image 2: Chief and Council Members of Poplar River First Nation with Mike Pierre (CIER).

Community Operations and Local Businesses

The winter road is an important link for getting adequate and affordable supplies into Poplar River for local operations and businesses (e.g. grocery stores, schools, nursing station, and band operations and projects). When the winter road season is short, the supply of food, goods, and fuel into the community is diminished and prices are much higher. One community member indicated that in years (such as 2006) when the winter road is weak and only allows half-loaded trucks, it is difficult to find companies willing to transport goods into the community since their profit margin is so low.

Personal health and safety



Image 3: Austin Franklin, NADAP Coordinator (Poplar River Health Centre) provided insight into changes in ice conditions and impacts on community activities.

There are a number of health and safety issues related to the change in weather and ice conditions and the remote location of Poplar River. The high cost of food affects community health since it is too expensive to buy healthy food (such as milk and produce). As a result, many individuals eat cheaper, but less healthy, alternatives. There are concerns about the high rate of Diabetes in the community.

In the winter, the personal safety of trappers, hunters, fishers, road construction crews, and others is dependent on the presence of strong, reliable ice on frozen water bodies. Poor ice conditions in recent years have resulted in individuals from Poplar River falling through the ice/muskeg on foot, snowmobile, and bombardier. These types of accidents are also happening in neighbouring communities.

The change in the weather also affects health-related programs such as sweats, workshops, and healing programs that are normally held at the camp at Weaver Lake throughout the year. During warm winters such as this, community members cannot access the camp since the trails to Weaver Lake are unfrozen, slushy, and impassable.

4. Strategies, Capacity, Barriers, and Drivers

Community members indicated a need to be aware, plan ahead, and be prepared for changes that they are facing with respect to weather and accessibility.

Physical Infrastructure / Winter Road Construction

In order to make creeks passable for the winter road, construction crews typically make the ice thicker by breaking the ice and allowing it to re-freeze, and then repeating this procedure. This year, due to the warm weather, the usual procedure is not working. Since they are losing blue ice from the bottom, they keep flooding the surface of the road to build it up again, crews are finding it necessary to continually flood, freeze, and re-pack the creeks.

Financial

Various strategies exist for offsetting the high cost of living in Poplar River. Some community members hunt, trap, and fish

to offset the high costs in the community. However, the high levels of slush, high levels of snow in the bush, and unfrozen regions of water around the community now makes it difficult to carry out these activities since there are concerns about personal safety. Since commercial ice fishing is no longer feasible, individuals now catch their winter quota in the spring and fall.

Subsidy programs are needed to support community members in Poplar River. At Christmas time, the store and the band hand out hampers to those that can't travel on the winter roads into Winnipeg to purchase affordable goods. This program could be expanded if the band would travel to Winnipeg, buy goods in bulk, and sell it to community members at affordable prices (this would be particularly useful for low-income earners). If the winter road doesn't open to regular traffic, the community will require government subsidies (e.g. for gas, fuel, and food) such as were provided in 1997.

Access to Goods

When the barge is operating or the winter road is open, local businesses and operations, as well as community members have access to goods from large centres (e.g. Winnipeg) connected to all-weather roads. In warm years when the winter road season is short, the opportunity stock up on goods is limited. Unnecessary supplies (such as furniture) are given lower priority on air cargo or freight than our necessary goods such as groceries. The store does keep a sufficient level of emergency stock in case of a natural disaster.

Personal Health and Safety

In order to address personal health and safety issues, community members need to be prepared for emergency situations. For example, community members are being advised not to travel on frozen water bodies on their own. Portage routes are being developed and utilized by trappers and other community members since small skidoos get stuck in the slush, and large skidoos may fall through the ice. Whenever possible, travel should be done on the shore of the river or lake. Individuals should only travel in the middle of the river if there is too much slush along the river edge. Emergency supplies (such as matches and a lighter) should also be brought along (and carried in a plastic bag) in case of falling through the ice.



Image 4: Stanley Bittern, indicates on a map where Poplar River's winter road crosses a creek on the way to Beren's River.

Individuals need to be aware that conditions on the ice change each day. A route that was safe one day may not be safe the next day, or even later that same day. The ice is so weak that it often weakens after only one trip across it. Thus, it is best to use one route when going out, and a different return route.

Community members described concerns about an increased number of power outages and greater risk of forest fires associated with individuals cooking outdoors on fires. An Emergency Preparedness Plan (EPP) has been developed by the fire chief. However, the community does not know what issues the EPP addresses or what measures are described therein.

To address concerns about lack of healthy food, one community member would like to set up a committee for a community garden.

All-weather road and other transportation alternatives

One of the strategies that has been suggested for addressing many of the concerns in the community is the creation of an all-weather road along the east-side of Lake Winnipeg, connecting Poplar River to several First Nations communities, and ultimately to Winnipeg. This possibility has been discussed for 30 years now. Although the all-weather road would address many of the concerns (e.g. social, financial, economic and health) of the community and would provide employment (in construction) for at least a decade, many outstanding issues remain. These include concerns about the feasibility of constructing the road (e.g. bogs that 'have no bottom'), the introduction of negative influences from the outside world (e.g. industrial development, drugs, alcohol, and gangs), the loss of traditional values and ways, safety concerns related to travel (e.g. motor vehicle collisions), and regulations that impose a protected area status on land around Poplar River. People need to have more information and sufficient time to weigh the pros and cons of the all-weather road.

Aside from construction of an all-weather road, one of the other suggestions for alternative transportation is to build a larger airstrip for bigger airplanes to haul in goods.

Communication, Programs, and Training

In order to address the issues that the community is facing, there needs to be better communication, as well as available programs and training. Chief and Council also need to keep the community informed and allow them to understand what is happening in the decision-making processes. There needs to be greater communication with the south as government support is key. Programs and training cost money and if there is no government support, then there is no money to implement ideas.

Research, studies, and conferences (e.g. on climate change, winter roads, local plants, etc.) are important for asking questions, getting answers, and gathering ideas. Information needs to be shared amongst the community in simple

language that is understandable to all. Additionally, information should be translated into local languages so that the Elders can be part of the solution. Poplar River youth need a voice as they feel that the Youth Council of Manitoba (whose members generally do not have experience in remote communities) cannot adequately represent their needs.

If an all-weather road is to be constructed, community members need jobs and training (i.e. to be heavy equipment operators, mechanics, and first aid workers). The training should happen locally since individuals are generally more comfortable in the community of Poplar River than they would be in Winnipeg.

5. Roles and Responsibilities

Community members

- Create awareness
- Get involved - more voices deliver a stronger message
- Talk about and document our concerns
- Support each other
- Communicate concerns to Chief and Council
- Organize

Chief and Council

- Hold meetings to learn from the community
- Understand through observation
- Listen to the people
- Be accountable to the people
- Keep community informed throughout decision-making processes
- Plan ahead
- Demonstrate leadership

Regional (Tribal Councils)

- Get informed and involved

Provincial Government

- Get involved
- Provide funding
- Be aware of what is happening and why
- Communicate
- Help provide education and training programs
- Work together (with community and federal government)

Federal Government

- Provide funding
- Come to communities to see what is really needed
- Help provide education and training programs
- Work together (with community and provincial government)