

The Kingston-Temagami Action Group

Bringing the Fight for Temagami to Kingston

One of the largest profile, and most contentious, Canadian environmental protests of the 1990s was that surrounding the logging of the Temagami region. This protest largely revolved around the expansion of the Red Squirrel Logging Road into one of the most venerable and vulnerable ecosystems in Canada: Old Growth red and white pine forest. The forest under contention is known as the Temagami forest, with an area of over nineteen hundred square kilometers, populated by pine hundreds of years old. It is one of the few places in Canada, and indeed one of the few places in North America, that this old growth can still be found. Temagami represents 48% of Canada's old growth red and white pine forest, and all of it is on unceded indigenous land. The section of forest slated for logging in 1998 is and has been the homeland of the Teme-Augama Anishnabai for over six thousand years. Logging has been allowed in the region –in moderation- for decades. The logging practices historically used in Temagami were selective, leaving undergrowth and younger trees, ensuring the swift recovery of the forest. The proposed new logging road, and the new techniques of clearcutting would have destroyed the forest. Indigenous rights groups and environmentalists alike were outraged.

Kingston was one of the main urban places this outrage turned to action. The protest also grew and flourished in the region of Temagami itself which included protesters blockading roads, and chaining themselves to trees. These protestors in Temagami itself were supported and encouraged by actions in solidarity from other areas across the province. In Kingston, the protests took a slightly different approach than those used in the actual heartland of Temagami. One of the most prominent pieces of action was the two-week long occupation of the office of Ken Keyes, Liberal MPP representing Kingston and the Islands. This sit-in began on September 22nd 1989 when “about a dozen”¹ protesters occupied the office for several hours on a Friday afternoon. Undeterred by the fact that Keyes wasn't in his office that day, the protesters vowed to return the following week. On September 29th, they did just that. What began on the twenty second had clearly experienced some refinement by the next week: four of the protestors did not leave the building when the office shut for the weekend. Cheryl Burr A.O., Ron Shore, Steve Schilpf, and a woman gave her name simply as “Squeig” chained themselves to furniture in the Keyes' office, and would not be removed. Many others occupied the office during the day, but removed themselves to camp outside the office during the nights and over the weekend, when the office was closed. This sit-in, camp-out strategy of pressing local MPPs to affect change on this issue inspired Temagami Action Groups in other municipalities. Ron shore noted in an interview with the Whig Standard that groups in Newmarket, Toronto and Montreal were considering “similar actions” to the ones in Kingston.²

The occupation of Keyes' office ended on October 3rd, when the protesters were forcibly carried out of the building by police and arrested for trespassing, despite obtaining permission from Mr. Keyes to stay as long as they did not violate the safety of the building the Friday before. Once the protesters were arrested on the weekend of the 3rd, the damn seemed to break: a total of 29 arrests were made that week, “about 16 protestors,” some having been arrested more than once. The sit-in officially ended on October 12th, when spokeswoman for the group Renee Waugh announced that the group would be “regrouping and re analyzing our strategy,”³ but asserted that they had no plans of leaving the cause.

¹ Michael Lea, “Group Stages Sit-In at MPP's Office Over Logging Controversy,” *Whig-Standard*, September 23, 1989.

² Michael Lea, “Women Occupy MPP's Office in Temagami Protest,” *Whig-Standard*, September 30th, 1989.

³ Michael Lea, “Temagami Protest Ends,” *Whig-Standard*, October 12th, 1989.

In the New Year, the protest resumed, in a quite new and novel way. On February 22nd, residents across Kingston woke to letters slipped into mailboxes and maillots. These notices, written on official Ministry of Natural Resources letterhead, announced that a new logging initiative was coming not to the wilderness of Temagami, but to the streets of Kingston. The letter stated that this was to avoid a municipal tax hike, and that any citizens with individual, specific complaints could call the number provided. The number was that of Kingston and the Islands MPP Ken Keyes.

The hoax included tagging trees for 'removal' by marking them with fluorescent tape. These trees could be found along public boulevards and in public parks, and in an interview with the Whig, one Kingston resident said her "heart just sunk."⁴ Ms. Robinson, the woman interviewed, also said she immediately linked the action to the logging in Temagami. "It got me," she said.⁵ Concerned residents were invited to call a number at the bottom of the letter, which directed them to local MPP Ken Keyes. No group ever claimed responsibility for this stunt, but a group of protesters staged another sit-in that day at his Kingston office. It is likely that this hoax brought as much, if not more, attention to the logging in Temagami as any of the more traditional protests from the year before. It certainly resulted in more calls to the MPP's office than most of the other actions.

The actual issue of logging in the region was resolved in a quite unexpected way the following year: The provincial liberal government led by Premier David Paterson lost the snap election they themselves called. In a twist predicted by neither the polls nor the liberals, the Ontario New Democrats swept into a comfortable 74 seat majority. This was their first time winning a provincial election in Ontario. Led by Bob Rae, who had been arrested for blockading a logging road in Temagami in 1989 proved more receptive to the requests of the Teme-Augama Anishnabai than their predecessors had been.

The Rae government completed and respected the negotiations that had begun with the Teme-Augama Anishnabai in the previous April. The deal begun by the liberals, and respected and maintained by the NDP placed forty thousand acres of Temagami forest under the stewardship of a council composed half of Teme-Augama Anishnabai and half of "Ontarians." The council mandated a consensus of all members to reach any decision around development of the land under its stewardship, and removed this land from the Jurisdiction of the Ministry of Natural Resources⁶. This solution lasted until the provincial election of 1995, when Bob Rae's government was defeated by Mike Harris's Progressive Conservatives.

The plan submitted by the stewardship council was unilaterally rejected by the Harris government on June 28th, 1996. Chris Hodgson, the new minister of natural resources, not only rejected the proposal of the council but also withdrew from treaty negotiations with the Teme-Augama Anishnabai and declared the region open for business. Harris announced that the Ontarian government was "very concerned about how long it [was] taking" to develop a plan that included opening the land to mining and forestry companies⁷. The Harris conservatives opened 77% of Temagami to mining, 71% to logging, and designating only 24% of the old growth forest to conservation. Protests erupted province wide shortly thereafter.

Kingston, as it was in the protests in 1989, was at the forefront of this movement. In fact, many of the protests led by the Kingston Temagami action group in those years formed the basis for larger, more widespread action in this round of protests. The infamous flyer hoax of 1990 was repeated, albeit on a much larger scale, on September 18th, 1996. This time, in addition to Kingston, these letters were pushed through

⁴ Elizabeth Church, "Tree Cutting Hoax Alarms Residents," *Whig-Standard*, February 23, 1990.

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ "The Battle Over Temagami," *As It Happens*, CBC Radio (CBLT-DT, April 23, 1990.)

⁷ "Open Temagami, Premier Suggests," *Toronto Star*, July 31, 1995.

mail slots in Guelph and Peterborough. Despite the flyers using outdated Ministry of Natural Resources letterhead, Kingston's city hall alone received approximately 500 calls the day the leaflets went out. The Ministry of Natural Resources, which was the number now provided on the letter for concerned citizens to register their complaints, was "flooded."⁸ Although no individuals ever took responsibility for the action, although Brad Waugh of the Kingston Temagami action group admits that his group was involved, and that they were assisted by OPIRG Kingston, as well as PIRGs and Temagami action groups in the other cities.

Intercity co-operation became a mainstay of this second round of protests much more than it was in the first round. On October 15th, 1996 Temagami action groups from all over the province co-ordinated a collective effort in Peterborough, the headquarters of the Ministry of Natural Resources. The Kingston Temagami action group subsidised bus tickets for \$8 a seat, which they helped fund through events at the Sleepless Goat Café as well as donation jars at the Sleepless Goat and in the OPIRG Kingston office.

They were joined in Peterborough by Temagami action groups from Peterborough itself, as well as Toronto and Guelph. The collected company held a rally in a public park, and collected signatures on a petition to halt the further development of Temagami. They then delivered this petition personally, marching on the Ministry of Natural Resources building. They then remained outside the building for several hours. At 2:00 pm, fifteen protesters broke from the main group who remained outside, and entered the building. A confrontation with the police ensued, ending with twelve protesters being pepper sprayed, and fourteen protesters arrested. Of those, eleven were on charges of criminal mischief, two were on charges of assaulting an officer, and one was on charges of resisting arrest. Many registered complaints that police had used excessive force, and one protester on the scene complained that she had been prevented from leaving to seek medical attention after being pepper sprayed.⁹

In 1997, due to pressures from environmental groups such as the ones at the headquarters, the Ontario Cabinet passed the Temagami Land Use Plan, designating protected areas and areas for development. Although many environmentalists felt that the act did not go far enough, but it did offer a compromise that left large portions of Temagami entirely undeveloped, and also held the Ministry of Natural Resources to a law higher than itself, which allowed the Environmental Ministry to sue the MNR for violation of the Act later in 1997.

The Teme-Augama Anishnabai obtained a fully recognised land treaty in 2002, one hundred and twenty five years after their first attempt.

Temagami remains largely unlogged to this day, with the descendants of municipal Temagami action groups continuing their work as Friends of Temagami and Save Wolf Lake, who continue to press for the cessation of mining in the region and greater guaranteed protection for old growth forest.

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⁸ Jeff Outhlt, "Area Environmentalists Recycle Tree Hoax," *Whig-Standard*, September 18, 1996.

⁹ Temagami Action Group-Peterborough, 1996, *2 People Charged, 6 People Maced, 12 People Occupying The MNR Headquarters In Peterborough*.