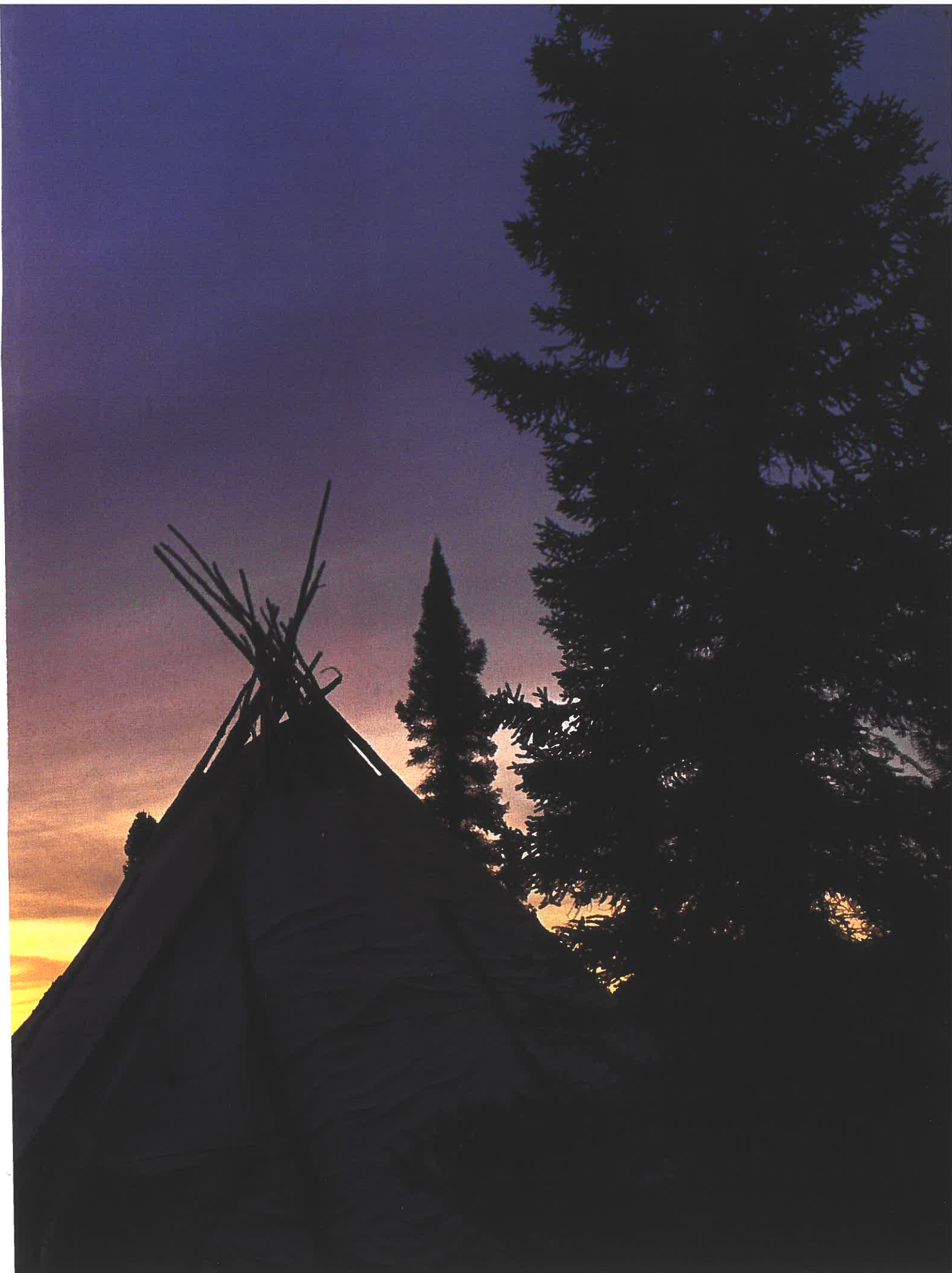


Rafting *the* Great Whale

The Cree Indians have avoided white water for centuries. Now, to help save the river they love, they're learning to raft it. By Carol Goodstein.

Photography by Barry Tessman

We are not far along the Great Whale river when it cleaves into two eight-foot waves, parted down the middle by a foamy, writhing tongue. The guides pull over and pace the shore to scout the best route and assure us that, should we swim the Class IV rapid, we'll spill into a pool just around the next turn in the river — one that we can't quite see.





The first raft topples over the ledge, is lapped up and drops out of sight. We wait — one one-thousand, two one-thousand, three one-thousand — and exhale when the clumsy rubber boat crests into view.

Our turn. "Remember, when I say, 'forward,' blast it," directs Barry, the guide. He does and in one synchronized swoop, we plow six paddles into the water, hurtling ourselves toward Hudson Bay.

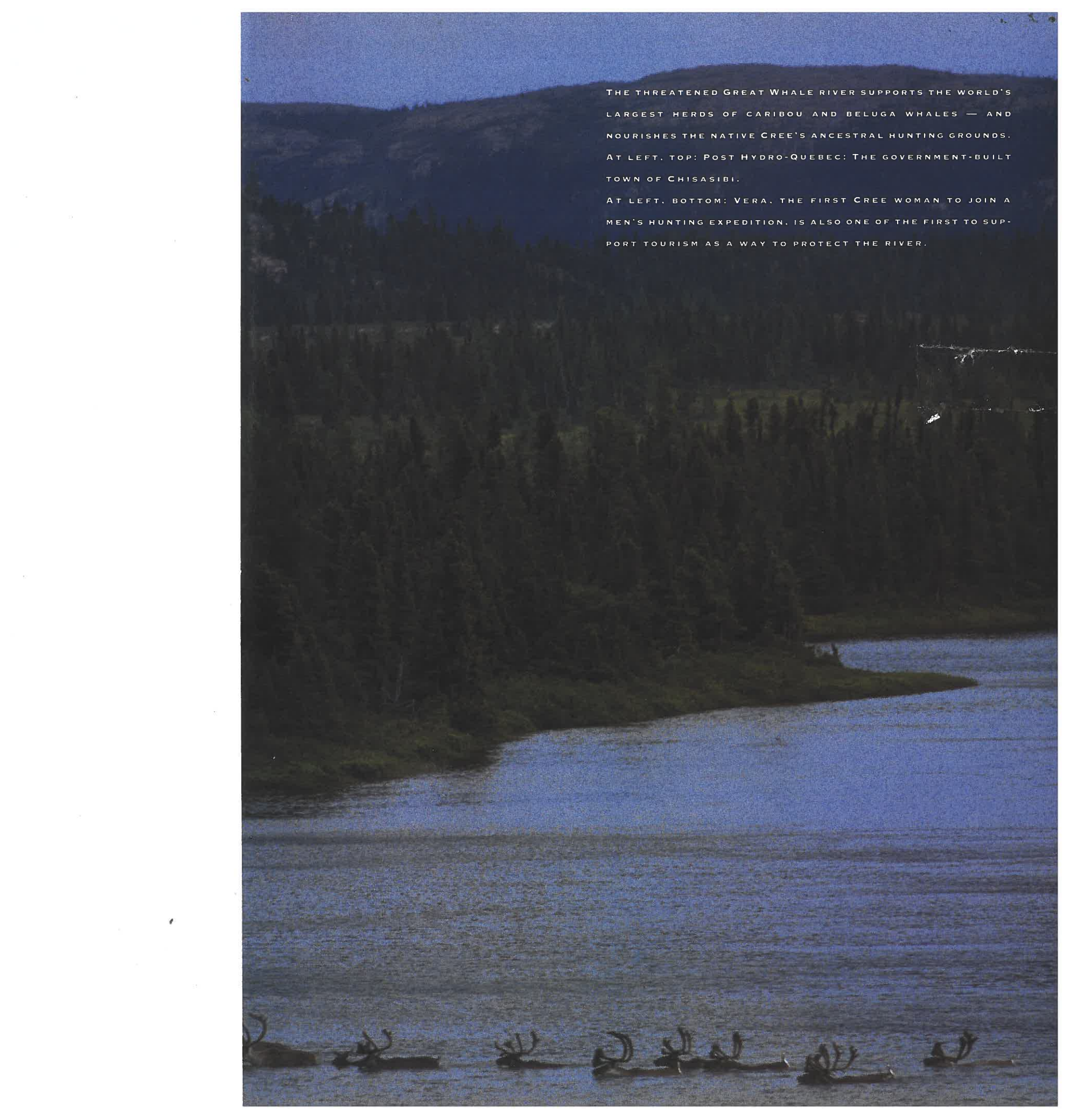
We're battling the river's power — that same power that the provincially owned Hydro-Quebec utility company wants to harness. And not just from the Great Whale, but from every last free-flowing waterway in northern Quebec. Along with rivers, the project would wipe out the world's largest herds of caribou and beluga whales, the world's largest waterfowl breeding ground and the native Cree's ancestral hunting grounds.

Which is why we're here: Dedicated conservationist Eric Hertz, president of Earth River Expeditions, is training several members of the Whapmagoostui band of Cree to run whitewater. It's Hertz's hope that within a couple of years the Cree will be guiding trips — generating



cash income and much-needed jobs for their community — and raising public awareness about the campaign to stop Hydro-Quebec.

A noble effort with one potential snafu: For 5,000 years the Cree have been avoiding whitewater. Not only have they portaged their canoes around it, they've stigmatized it by naming rapids for allegedly drowned ancestors.



THE THREATENED GREAT WHALE RIVER SUPPORTS THE WORLD'S
LARGEST HERDS OF CARIBOU AND BELUGA WHALES — AND
NOURISHES THE NATIVE CREE'S ANCESTRAL HUNTING GROUNDS.
AT LEFT, TOP: POST HYDRO-QUEBEC: THE GOVERNMENT-BUILT
TOWN OF CHISASIBI.

AT LEFT, BOTTOM: VERA, THE FIRST CREE WOMAN TO JOIN A
MEN'S HUNTING EXPEDITION, IS ALSO ONE OF THE FIRST TO SUP-
PORT TOURISM AS A WAY TO PROTECT THE RIVER.

According to Suzanne Hilton, coordinator of the Great Whale Environmental Assessment, there are quite a few cultural glitches to be worked out. "This is pretty high-tech and the Cree are pretty low-tech. They're boggled by why anybody would settle down for one night — how do you get to know a place? — and there are so many logistics involved. It's very un-Cree," she says, "the Cree do what needs to be done and don't do make-work projects."

Nevertheless, the Cree realize that

come to the subarctic north, the more saturated the rolling hills become with peat bogs and pools of water.

As we take off from our third airport in this roadless taiga, the pilot points out a vast floodlands to our right, Phase I of what Hydro-Quebec hopes will be the world's largest project of its kind. Completed in 1985 after 12 years, this phase alone includes three reservoirs and powerhouses. It's a powerful reminder of why we've come.

In the wake of that construction, the

have dangerously high levels of mercury in their systems. Fish, once a cheap and common food source, has been eliminated from their diet. It's a problem that Hydro-Quebec hadn't quite anticipated.

We land at midday and Great Whale is quiet and buggy. August is black fly season in the north country, and today they are particularly fierce.

Former and acting Cree chief Robbie Dick greets us and eloquently describes his people's efforts to maintain their culture. "As long as the land is intact, our culture is intact," he says. "Flooding and excavating the land is like scraping away at us... When you look at the land and feel its presence, you'll understand why we want to keep it. We welcome newcomers and in turn feel you should welcome our ways. I hope you'll have a nice stay and the environment will be good to you."

That night we are guests of families in town. Helen, one of three psychologists in our group, and I are hosted by a 25-year-old Cree mother of two named Maggie. Her husband is away in the bush. Maggie toasts fish sticks and french fries and we make strained conversation — Helen and I asking most of the questions, and Maggie answering in as few words as possible.

Put-in the next day is a 20-minute flight by bush plane. Thirty years ago these bush planes revolutionized the Cree way of life. Before that, the Cree traveled with only what they needed. As one Cree woman said, "with the plane, you get to take an overload."

We arrive just in time for dinner, and I set up my tent on a spongy patch of lichen just above the riverbank. At 10:30, it's still dusk, and the pine trees are flattening into a spiked wall of shadows. When the sky turns black, the pink and green aurora borealis sweeps across the sky, and I am lulled to sleep by the muffled roar of rapids. The Cree call this land "The Garden."

Swaddled in layers of polypropylene, fleece, raingear and our ever-present fly-proof headnets, we pack off down the river the next morning. There is a paddle boat, an oar boat and a com-



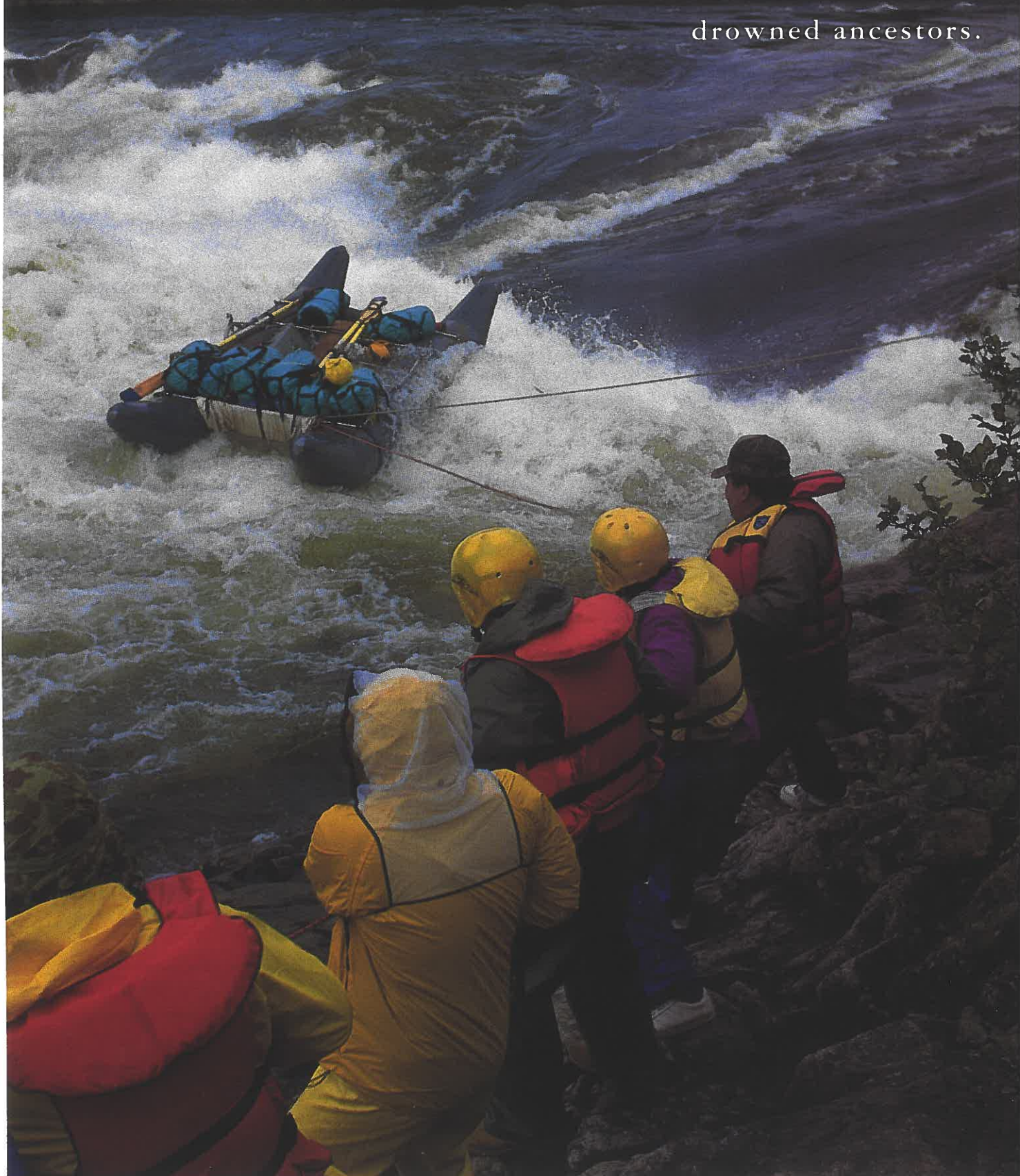
change is inevitable and are excited by the anticipated benefits of this project. Four community members, including one woman, have joined a half dozen guides and 20 paying guests for this second orientation expedition.

The flight to the town of Great Whale, which is at the mouth of the river and almost due north of Montreal on the eastern shores of James Bay, is a four-hour puddle jumper from Montreal. We pass over dense stands of pine, uniformly staunch and erect, and wide bald swaths of rock and earth, the residue of clear-cutting. The closer we

Cree island community of Fort George was relocated to the nearby government-built town of Chisasibi and supplied with electricity, running water, a mall and a high-tech community center. Cut off from their traditional lifeways, they also now have a festering drug and alcohol problem. Last summer, four young kids shot themselves.

The flooding has been not only socially and spiritually toxic but physically as well. Decomposing vegetation transformed mercury that lay dormant in the rocks into methyl mercury, which evaporated and returned with rain. The rain contaminated the rivers and fish and today, two-thirds of the Cree in Chisasibi

Not only have the Cree historically portaged their canoes around whitewater, they've stigmatized it by naming rapids for allegedly drowned ancestors.



bination of the two to accommodate our various levels of experience and interest. I opt for paddling.

The Pearly Gates is the first big water we hit, and it's huge. Eric assures us that, though it's big, it's neither rocky nor dangerous. The Cree, however, hold true to native tradition and skirt the rapid on foot.

For Vera and Jimmy, a Cree couple on our trip, simply watching people paddling whitewater is experience enough. Even by dinner that evening, they both seem somewhat suspended in disbelief. Vera is quietly cooking caribou, demonstrating how to slice the dry, lean meat into slabs, wrap them around long wooden skewers and roast them over the fire. There is enough meat in one of these animals to feed a family of four for a month.

Jimmy, one of five grand councilors for this band of Cree, is lying on his side behind Vera, tasting the strips of cooked meat and nodding with approval. Vera claims she is here because Jimmy wanted her to come. It's the politically correct response — a Cree woman always defers to her husband — but I have a hard time believing she's here on Jimmy's say-so.

Like many Cree women, Vera is heavysset with broad cheeks, coffee-colored skin and large, weathered hands. She is 36, has seven children — one of whom is an adopted Inuit — and one grandchild. She is an elementary school teacher. Otherwise, she hardly represents the norm. Although it's clear to see that she and Jimmy are in love by their constant affection and easy laughter, she says she wishes she'd married at 30, instead of 17, so she could have gotten her master's degree and concentrated on her career. She also tells me she was the first Cree woman to join a men's hunting expedition and the first to kill a caribou. Later, watching her take pot shots at a log floating down the river, I don't doubt it.

In the morning, the river is broad and flat and reflects a steely gray sky. We roll over a couple of sputtering rapids and have just lashed the boats together for a floating lunch when the clouds let loose. We pull over to set up camp on a rocky spit that juts out into a quiet cove and find two racks of cari-

bou antlers and an old fire ring. It has been a Cree camp.

The Cree's land in the bush is divided into 400-square mile or more traplines (hunting grounds) that are handed down generationally. Jimmy's family's trapline is not far from here. He tells us he was born just a few miles upriver.

Traditionally, the Cree were a nomadic people, moving about the bush from September through June and returning to the settlement for just a few short months each summer. Over half the community still spends winters in the bush, where temperatures can drop to 50 below zero.

When they're in the bush, it's the woman's job to build the tepee. Vera's brought along the white canvas flap that her mother sewed, and she shows us how to find the driest spruce poles and scrape off the bark, "so the pieces won't fall into peoples' eyes as they look up at the sky." We collect stones for the fire ring and lay spruce boughs in a herringbone pattern around it. Vera's fastidious, and although it takes most of the afternoon to build, the tepee is magnificent — cozy, fragrant and functional. We all resolve to build our own at home.

It's still raining the following morning, and with people wheezing from colds and complaining of sore throats, Eric decides it's best to stay put. So all 30 of us huddle inside the tepee, beneath lines of socks, sneakers and poly-pro drying above the fire.

Mostly we eat — pancakes drenched in maple syrup, bagels toasted in a Dutch oven and oatmeal with chicken salad sandwiches and caribou stew for dinner.

We also read and talk, as Vera tells me later, far too much. In the bush, the Cree are quiet. Even the children learn not to laugh loudly or yell. As Vera explains afterward, this is why we don't see any animals.

Our last morning on the river is crisp and sunny, more typical of early August. I'm glad to be back on the water. The riverbed widens. We pass open areas where the trees have burned — a lightning fire so hot with winds so strong that the flames jumped shores. We pass a helicopter, perched like a bird on a rock next to the riverbank — Hydro-Quebec, ostensibly on a fact-finding mission to assess the impact of the damage they plan to wreak. But no, they are fishing. We wave. They take our picture. We pose. Now we are part of the study.

The plane is not at the take out, as planned, and we can only guess what's happened to it: fog down at Great Whale, a broken part, the pilot's forgotten us. I'm a little nervous about being stranded out here until I realize I'm not. To the Cree way of thinking, I'm home.

Jimmy says he hears an engine, then Vera hears it and minutes later, the rest of us. I'm disappointed to leave the river, especially not knowing if it will be here when I want to come back.

As the plane is landing, Jimmy points to the top of a bluff at water's edge. A black bear and her cub are watching us, watching the river. For the time being, it's a Disney ending.

Carol Goodstein writes about the environment, health and psychology from her Brooklyn, New York, home.

Details

Although the Cree will be organizing the logistics for the Great Whale river trip this season, Earth River will be guiding until the Cree become more skilled.

To participate, contact Earth River Expeditions, RD 2, Box 182A, Accord, NY 12404; (800) 643-2724 or (914) 626-2665. Trips are scheduled for August 17-23 and August 23-30. The \$1,300 fee does not include airfare.

For more information or to contribute to the fight to save James Bay, contact the Natural Resources Defense Council, 40 W. 20th St., New York, NY 10011; (212) 727-2700, or the Earth River Fund, Audubon Society of New York, RR 2, Box 131, Selkirk, NY 12158; (518) 767-9051.

— C.G.