

Emotional connection to Mactaquac dam, river valley studied

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The Mactaquac Hydro Electric Dam near Fredericton.
Photo: The Daily Gleaner archive

How much do people in New Brunswick know about the Mactaquac dam and what it means for the future of energy in the province?

That's the question a team of social scientists from Dalhousie University, the University of New Brunswick and the University of Alberta are trying to answer as part of a larger research project on energy literacy, attitudes and values toward different energy options, and the effects of energy choices.

The Mactaquac dam is expected to reach the end of its service life in 2030. NB Power has identified three options for the station:

1. refurbish;

2. rebuild;

3. decommission.

Decommission would involve restoring the St. John River valley by draining the headpond above the dam.

NB Power says it will be seeking input from experts, First Nations communities and New Brunswickers before selecting a preferred option in 2016.

Kate Sherren, an assistant professor and academic program co-ordinator at Dalhousie University's School for Resource and Environmental Studies, said the team received federal funding through a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council in 2012, but work didn't begin until summer 2013.

The team is made up of made up of three principal investigators as well as several students.

Along with the study of the Mactaquac dam, the project is also looking at sites in the Peace River, Alta., region and southern Ontario.

The project isn't designed to contribute directly to the decision about the dam, Sherren said. Nor does the team take a position on what should happen.

Rather, she said, the goal is to provide information that could help people in what has become a polarizing discussion, particularly for those living near the dam.

To gather information, Sherren said researchers conducted a national survey which included New Brunswickers.

They also did a headpond tour and conducted several in-person interviews with local residents to learn how they feel about the dam.

Sherren said one thing that became clear through the interview process was many people didn't know anything about what the area looked like before the dam was in place.

“People would show you photos but you couldn’t really understand how the photos related to the current landscape, so you could never understand the before and after in a way that made you yearn for what was there,” she said. “

There was simply no good sense of that.”

Sherren, who grew up in Nackawic, said she hadn’t seen pre-dam maps prior to embarking on the project.

The research team set to work creating a digital map to compare the areas. Available online, the map allows users to swipe back and forth between the current landscape and aerial images from 1962-63 from the Department of Natural Resources archives, which show the area before the dam was constructed.

The geo-referenced map covers the area between the dam and Pokiok Falls, with information about several different areas of interest included to create a digital, guided tour.

Sherrin said as a local resident, being involved in the interviews and creation of the map was a moving experience.

“I understood there had been change and I understood also there had been trauma associated with that change, that some people were devastated,” she said.

“Some chose to end their life. That’s one of the things you’ll see in the video – a woman describing how her grandfather chose to take his life rather than see the water come up over his property. There were some very difficult decisions that I, myself, could never quite picture the landscape. For me, this has been quite a revelation.”

Sherren said the interview process also showed how difficult it can be to engage younger people on the issue of the dam, noting the feedback researchers received from younger residents was that they couldn’t imagine the area without the dam.

“It’s never been any different,” she said. “In fact, a lot of people they describe it (the dam) as kind of natural to them. It’s obviously not natural. It’s a 55-metre wall of earth and concrete holding it in, but it’s perceived as natural. You get this kind of endowment effect. Nobody wants to lose what they have.”

Sherren said the debate today is similar to the one that happened when the dam was built.

“People were concerned about loss of community back in the 1960s, about loss of recreational opportunities and loss of all the exact same stuff,” she said.

“What’s interesting is despite that trauma, and maybe even because of it, they have made their sacrifice as a family. They have forged a new landscape and they have grown attached to these new landscapes and they don’t believe it’s fair that it should be taken from them again. There’s great emotion. There’s a complexity there that’s undeniable to the decision.”

Sherren said she thinks one of the things contributing to the polarized nature of the discussions about the dam is fear, which she thinks is driven by a lack of understanding what the area used to look like.

She said while NB Power has been sharing some information as part of its process, there still isn’t a lot of detail about what would happen should the dam be dismantled.

“The student who was speaking to local residents this summer said ‘You wouldn’t believe it, people think it will take 100 years to become anything but a muddy bog,’ ” she said.

“There are some ideas about this that are being fed and other people are just picking them up because there’s nothing else being presented. My sense is real stakeholder engagement needs to have more information. You can probably trust people more with information than they’re being trusted right now. What we’re trying to do is put out another little piece of information that can contribute to this discussion.”

Sherren said based on reception to the research so far, there seems to be an appetite for information.

Along with the creation of the map, Sherren said her team has made a documentary which has received thousands of views online since its release, despite no promotion.

“People are really hungry for information like this,” she said.

“As a province, we need to come up with energy. We need it. We need to be able to decide what an appropriate energy mix is and then make those specific decisions to fit that larger, what is appropriate in say, 30 years? What should the energy mix be?”

Where her group's research isn't funded by NB Power, Sherren said her goal is simple: to provide the public with information.

"I think at least we can consider being an honest broker in the process. I haven't got a preference," she said.

"People keep asking me and I say you know what? I don't have an agenda. What interests me is the way people can form attachments to landscape, to utilitarian things, the way that might influence our renewable energy future, things like that."

The documentary can be viewed online by visiting <http://vimeo.com/87082790>. The digital map can be found online at <http://bit.ly/1xZsOqi>.