Historical Overview of the

Rocher River/Taltson River/Tazin River Areas of the Northwest Territories and Northern Saskatchewan and the Tazin River Water Diversion

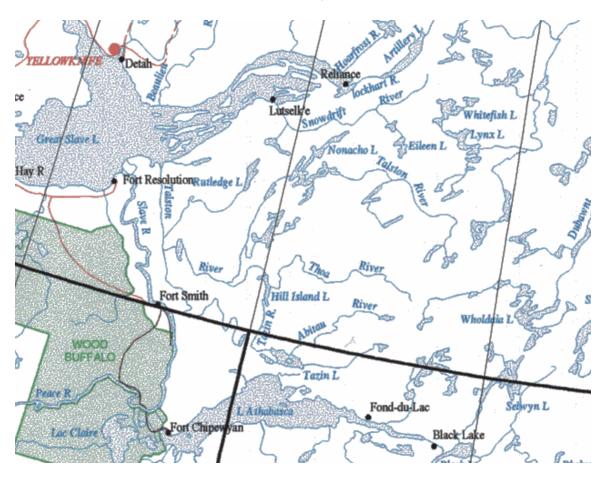
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Executive Summary

A review of published sources has revealed compelling evidence that the lands east of the Slave River between Great Slave Lake and Lake Athabasca have been within the traditional exploitive range of the Tatsanottine¹ Dene for at least the past 150 years and perhaps much longer. Within that time frame, this once numerous Dene group withdrew from their traditional lands around the East Arm of Great Slave Lake, the Barrens north of the East Arm and west along the north shore of Great Slave Lake beyond Yellowknife Bay and River to the area centred on the Taltson River. Today, the Tatsanottine Dene commonly refer to themselves as "Rocher River people" and over the past twenty or more years some have called for a renewal of their cultural identity in an effort to be seen as distinct from their cousins the Chipewyan. While some Tatsanottine still hunt and trap on their traditional lands along the Taltson River they have largely been dispersed to other communities in the north.

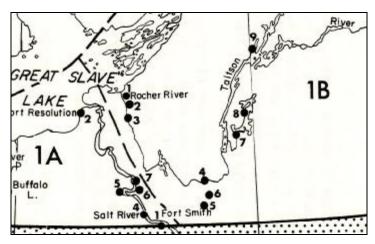
Also in this report a variety of sources were used to piece together a brief history of the inter-basin diversion of water from the Tazin River drainage system to Lake Athabasca. This water, which, prior to 1958, flowed north into the Northwest Territories' Taltson River, is used to generate electricity at three hydro electric stations on the Garry/Charlot river system on the north side of Lake Athabasca. A transmission line connects these power stations to the grid in southern Saskatchewan.

¹ The word 'Tatsanottine' is the modern day equivalent of Fr. Emile Petitot's "T'altsan-ottiné" and synonymous with Franklin's "Copper Indians", "Red Knives", "Yellow Knife", "Yellow Knives" and should not be confused with the Yellowknives Dene, the primarily Dogrib group, living in Yellowknife, Detah and N'Dilo, who adopted the name Yellowknives by Band Council Resolution in the early 1990s.

Introduction

Fifty years ago Rocher River was a bustling little community, the centre of a rich hunting, fishing and trapping area on the east side of the Slave River delta. Residents of this community, located on the east bank of the Taltson River approximately 4 kilometres upstream from the shores of Great Slave Lake, had easy access not only to the bounty of the delta but also to the lakes and streams of the Precambrian Shield to the east and southeast.

Prior to about 1920 these people lived in scattered camps throughout the region. They were trappers and hunters who conducted their trade at Fort Resolution. In 1921 the Hudson's Bay Company built a small trading post on the lower Taltson River (1B1 on the map below) to intercept trappers on their way to Fort Resolution to trade with rival, independent trading companies.



Portion of map² showing fur trade posts east of the Slave River

The Hudson's Bay post did well at this location and their competitors took notice and were soon also operating posts at Rocher River. Northern Traders Ltd. built a trading post there in 1923, it closed in 1936. Frank Morrison operated a trading post at Rocher River from 1924 to 1932; Ed DeMelt was there from 1935 until he sold to the Taltson River Trading Company in 1968.

². Usher, Peter J, *Fur Trade post of the Northwest Territories 1870-1970*, Ottawa: Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (Northern Science Research Group), 1971

Rival traders also operated posts in the immediate vicinity of Rocher River as well as much further up the Taltson in the area northeast of Fort Smith. Posts close to Rocher River were built at Snuff Channel and Rat River (1B2 and 1B3 on above map) and operated from the late 1920s through to the early 1940s.

Much further up the Taltson River, approximately three kilometres above Napie Falls (1B4), Fred Robinson operated a post from 1933 to 1940. To the south trading posts operated at Hanging Ice Lake (1B5) and Star Lake (1B6) from 1925 to 1927. Thekulthili and Nonacho lakes, near the upper reaches of the Taltson, had trading posts (1B7, 8 and 9) that operated from the mid-1920s through to the early 1940s.

This was obviously a rich trapping area yet the worldwide economic effects of the Second World War resulted in the closing of these outlying trading posts and the years immediately following the war brought considerable change to the region east of the Slave River. The Federal Government built a school at Rocher River and began to enforce compulsory school attendance laws. Dene moved from outlying regions into Rocher River so their children could attend school while maintaining traditional trap lines and hunting territories on the east side of the Slave River delta, and up the Taltson, Thoa and Tazin rivers. The community prospered, it had grown from a small Hudson's Bay Company trading post built in the early 1920s to a place that, by the mid-1950s, had two stores, a post office, a school and a population approaching a hundred and fifty.

In 1958 the school and teacher's residence burned to the ground and the Federal Government made the unfortunate decision – likely based on a desire to consolidate and centralize services at Fort Resolution – not to rebuild. To comply with the law, families with school-age children were forced to move from Rocher River; most relocated to Fort Resolution, Fort Smith, Hay River or Yellowknife. The Hudson's Bay trading post and store at Rocher River closed in 1963 and construction of the Taltson River dam, which some 'Rocher River people' claim

flooded traditional trapping areas, added further impetus for people to move from the area.

The historical record, summarized in the following section, gives strong evidence (1) that those who call themselves 'Rocher River people' are descendents of Franklin's "Copper Indians"; (2) that until very recently the lands they occupied east of the Slave River were within their traditional exploitive range; and, (3) that they moved from those lands for reasons largely beyond their control. The question of whether or not recent attempts to re-establish a cohesive cultural identity by some 'Rocher River people' – and to re-claim their historic name 'Tatsanottine Dene' or 'Yellowknives' – will result in valid political entity is well beyond the scope of this study.

Historical Evidence

The area east of the Slave River between Great Slave Lake and Lake Athabasca has largely been a grey area overlooked by anthropologists, ethnographers, geographers and historians. The general pattern of occupation and use of the areas around Great Slave Lake and Lake Athabasca, by northern Dene groups, was, in very general terms, laid out by Anthropologist Diamond Jenness³ in 1932 and repeated in the 1981 Smithsonian Institution's *Handbook of North American Indians*⁴.

Simply put, these pivotal publications, claim the 'Slavey', during the 1700s, occupied lands east of the Slave River but were pushed west by 'Chipewyan' during the 1800s and that the 'Chipewyan' continue to occupy these lands to the present day. Areas south of Great Slave Lake were not considered to be within the exploitive range of the 'Yellowknife'.

³ Jenness, Diamond The Indians of Canada Ottawa: National Museum of Canada, Bulletin 65, 1932

⁴ Sturtevant, William C. (general editor) *Handbook of North American Indians/Volume 6 Subarctic* (June Helm, volume editor) Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1981. See, in particular, the chapters "Dogrib" by June Helm, "Yellowknife" by Beryl C. Gillespie and "Chipewyan" by James G.E. Smith.

In Beryl Gillespie's chapter on the 'Yellowknife', her chronology of "Events and Conditions in Yellowknife History" ends with the year 1928 where she wrote "Influenza epidemic: native populations of Yellowknife River and eastward into the east arm of Great Slave Lake suffer many deaths." and goes on to claim that the 'Yellowknife' "were no longer an identifiable dialect or ethnic entity in the twentieth century" Gillespie had firmly, and apparently unequivocally, laid to rest the Tatsanottine people!

Yet there are some obvious shortcomings in Gillespie's chapter on the 'Yellowknife' – a work that has been very influential in shaping our perception of the history of the Tatsanottine people – and these become evident when she admits that her knowledge of these people was "based on published sources and on fieldwork among the Dogrib of Yellowknife Bay". It will become clear in the pages that follow that her examination of published sources, at least as they pertain to the Yellowknife/Tatsanottine Dene exploitive range south of Great Slave Lake, was cursory at best.

The earliest know published reference to the Tatsanottine Dene living on the south side Great Slave Lake comes from Sir John Franklin's journal⁸, a record of his first overland journey from the north shore of Great Slave Lake/Yellowknife Bay to the Arctic coast in 1819-1822. His guides, the "Copper Indians", told him that they originally lived on the south side of Great Slave Lake. Anthroplogist Diamond Jenness, commenting on this claim by the Tatsanottine, suggested that "if true, this must have been before the eighteenth century."

⁵ *ibid.* p. 287-8

⁶ *ibid*, p. 285

⁷ Gillespie, p. 290

⁸ Franklin, J. Narrative of a Journey to the Shores of the Polar Sea London, 1823, p. 287

⁹ Jenness, p. 388, footnote 3

What we understand today concerning the effects of the fur-trade makes this statement seems all the more likely. Traditional boundaries between native groups became meaningless after guns became available from fur-trading posts. Armed Cree took revenge on their traditional enemies the Chipewyan who, when they too became armed, pushed north-westward from their traditional lands along the Churchill River forcing Slavey, Dogrib, Beaver and Tatsanottine from their land. When trading companies moved onto the Athabasca and Slave rivers in the late 1700s guns became readily available to the Tatsanottine. They quickly gained a reputation for their aggressive behaviour and for taking revenge on their traditional enemies the Dogrib and the Chipewyan.

During the late 1700s and early 1800s it's believed the Tatsanottine Dene expanded their exploitive range to include large areas around the East Arm of Great Slave Lake, north towards the Barrens and west beyond Yellowknife Bay and River. This is where Franklin met the now famous Tatsanottine Chief Akaitcho in 1819.

During the 1820s the hostilities between the Dogrib and the Tatsanottine are often mentioned in Hudson's Bay Company trading post journals and by end of that decade the Dogrib appear to have gained the upper hand. In 1833 Akaitcho and other 'Yellow Knives' were employed as hunters for the Back Expedition¹⁰ wintering at Fort Reliance on the extreme east end of the East Arm of Great Slave Lake. Back describes Akaitcho as "no longer the same active and important person that he was in those [Franklin Expedition] days ... the Yellow Knives have drawn vengeance on themselves by their wonton and oppressive conduct towards their neighbours ... the wretched remnant were driven from the rich hunting grounds about the Yellow Knife River to the comparatively barren hills bordering on [the East Arm of] Great Slave Lake ... a degeneracy from

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¹⁰ Back, Captain, R.N. Narrative of the Arctic Land Expedition... London: John Murray, 1836

which they will probably never recover. There can not now be more than seventy families remaining."

Akaitcho died in the spring of 1838.

Twenty-five years later, in the spring of 1863, Akaitcho's widow, along with four of her surviving children, visited St. Joseph's Mission on Moose Island, a short distance off shore from Fort Resolution. Fr. Émile Petitot, in charge of the mission, "saw his [Akaitcho's] widow Lisette Sha-ttséghé, Low Martin, on Moose Island, when she was about 60 years old, along with four remaining children: Ekzéar Tsinnay-tchôp, Big Orphan, 40 years old and childless ... Élodie Épolaldzaré, Iliac Bone and Legs, 38, 4 children ... Marianne Elloussé, Fish Bladder, 37, 4 children ... Élie Kkpa-azè, Little Arrow, 25, 2 children." 12

Oblate Missionary Fr. Émile Petitot traveled extensively, during the years 1862-1882, in the areas around Great Slave and Great Bear Lakes and by "visiting and staying with various native groups in different localities, sharing their living conditions ... [recorded] ... in detail their life, legends, customs, beliefs, and languages" was, for all intents and purposes, an 'anthropologist', the first to compile information on the Dene of the Northwest Territories outside of the context of the fur-trade. With Petitot we get a glimpse of traditional Dene life and, of particular interest to this study, of the traditional exploitive ranges of northern Dene from more than a hundred years ago. Petitot produced, using little more than a compass and a watch, the first accurate and surprisingly detailed maps of much of today's Northwest Territories which included many place names as they were known to the people of the time.

From December 1862 through August 1864 Petitot was stationed at St Joseph's Mission and travelled extensively on Great Slave Lake, across the Slave River Delta and east of the Slave River Delta. He described the delta as swarming with

¹¹ *ibid*, p. 456-7

Petitot, Émile Travels Around Great Slave and Great Bear Lakes 1862-1882 Toronto: The Champlain Society, 2005 (a translation, with notes, by Paul Laverdure, Jacqueline Moir and John S. Moir of Petitot's Autour Du Grand Lac Des Esclaves Paris: Nouvelle Librairie Paresienne, 1891 and Exploration De La Région Du Grand Lac Des Ours Paris: Téqui, 1893)

¹³ *ibid* p.xi

big game and, in season, migratory birds of all types. Petitot had, in very short order, learned the often difficult languages of the north. His first written reference to the Tatsanottine comes from that first winter at St. Joseph's Mission. He spent considerable time with "an old blind man named Ekhounélyel, Warble Fly, [who] came to sit with me to tell me the legends of the Yellowknife." Ekhounélyel lived in a cabin at the mouth of the Little Buffalo River on the southwest side of the Slave River delta.

Describing the geography of the Great Slave Lake area Petitot wrote of the "the Tpatsan ottinè-Nènè to the north or Land of the Yellowknives"¹⁵. This presumably is an historical reference to their former exploitive range because in 1883 he produced a map showing the 'Yellow Knives' as living east of the Slave River. This map also labels what we know today as the Taltson River as "Yellow Knives R or T'al'tsan-Déssé R."¹⁶

An earlier map labels the Taltson River as "R. du Rocher ou T'altsan-désse" and just beyond this river, around the extreme east end of the East Arm of Great Slave Lake, Petitot places the label "T'ALTSAN-OTTINÈ", literally, the land of the Tatsanottine.¹⁷

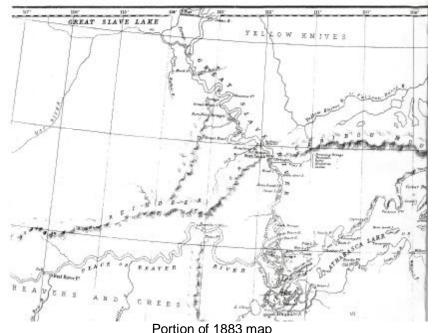
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¹⁴ *ibid*, p.46

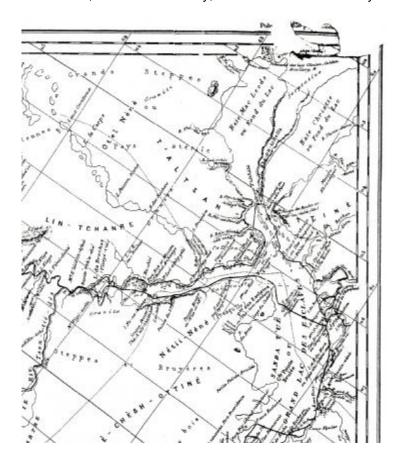
¹⁵ *ibid*, p.49

¹⁶ Published in the Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society and reproduced in Savoie, Donat (ed) *Land Occupancy by the Amerindians of the Canadian Northwest in the 19th Century as reported by Émile Petitot* Canada: Indian and Northern Affairs (CCI Press), 2001

¹⁷ Carte des Expéditions Chez Les Dindjié et les Déné Septentrionaux, Emile Petitot, Prêtre Missionnaire, Dressée par lui-même de 1862 à 1873 reproduced in Savoie, Donat (ed) *Land Occupancy by the Amerindians of the Canadian Northwest in the 19th Century as reported by Émile Petitot Canada: Indian and Northern Affairs (CCI Press), 2001*



Portion of 1883 map "British North America, Northwest Territory, District of Athabasca..." by Emile Petitot

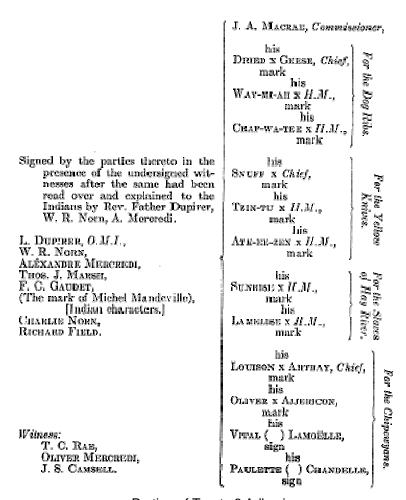


Portion of Carte des Expéditions Chez Les Dindjié et les Déné Septentrionaux [1872?]

Additional cartographic, toponymic and textual evidence of the traditional lands of the Tatsanottine Dene can be found in Donat Savoie's *Land Occupancy by the Amerindians of the Canadian Northwest in the 19th Century*, an exhaustive compilation of Petitot's work that has only recently be made available to the general public. Even more recently the Champlain Society translation and publication, previously cited, of two of Petitot's rarest books has revealed a wealth of information on the Tatsanottine Dene and their relationship to the Taltson River and areas further east along the East Arm of Great Slave Lake.

It's possible, and even highly likely, that Petitot gave the name T'al'tsan-Dessé – to the river we now call Taltson – specifically as a designator for where the Tatsanottine Dene lived. He acknowledges the use of older names for this feature, such as Back's "Thu-wu-desseh" or, as Petitot wrote it, Tthu-pan-déssé, literally "the river Des Seins [breasts]" and also Samuel Hearne's name for the river "des Mamelles [breasts]". Petitot's use the name "R. du Rocher", a description of the high, rounded hills of granite near the mouth of this river, is also presumably the origin of the reference to 'breasts'.

Less than twenty years after Fr. Petitot left the north the Canadian Government sent in a treaty party to negotiate Treaty 8 with Dene groups living south of Great Slave Lake. While much of the treaty was negotiated and signed in 1899 the Dene of the Fort Resolution area didn't sign until 1900. On July 25th representatives of the 'Dog Ribs', the 'Slaves of Hay River', the 'Chipewyans' and the 'Yellow Knives' signed the treaty. For the Tatsanottine Dene ('Yellow Knives') Chief Snuff, Tzin-tu and Ate-ee-zen made their marks.



Portion of Treaty 8 Adhesion

Chief Snuff, a Tatsanottine Dene, lived along the lower Taltson River on a channel that people of the area called Snuff Channel. This local usage was given official recognition by the Geographic Board of Canada in 1936.

A hundred years ago the line between who was Chipewyan and who was Tatsanottine had begun to blur. In 1907 naturalist Ernest Thompson Seton travelled down the Slave River to Fort Resolution where he hired a group of 'Great Slave Lake Indians'. He described them as "like a lot of spoiled and petulant children" 18 Their job was to row his York boat and 1300 pounds of supplies from the Slave River delta to the east end of the East Arm of Great

¹⁸ Seton, Ernest Thompson *The Arctic Prairies: A Canoe-Journey of 2000 Miles in Search of the Caribou...* New York: International University Press, 1911, p. 144

Slave Lake and to carry those supplies over Pikes Portage. He later referred to them as "these Chipewyans". Their main guide was Louison 'Weeso' d'Noire, his son Francois d'Noire, William Freesay, Billy Loutit, [?] Beaulieu, three others for whom he only used initials because he had nothing good to say about them, and finally, Chief Snuff, the leader of the Tatsanottine Dene! A few years later this confusion over 'Yellowknife' versus 'Chipewyan' is again apparent. In 1913 ethnologist J.A. Mason, conducting field work among the Chipewyan of Fort Resolution¹⁹, photographed a group of Dene lodges and identified them as 'possibly Yellowknife'.

For the fifty years that followed, there continued to be Dene who specifically identified themselves as Tatsanottine and even Beryl Gillespie, the anthropologist who wrote so convincingly of the 'disappearance' of the these people, grudgingly accepted that "in the 1960s the Chipewyan of Fort Resolution used *tatsotine* [diacritics not included], perhaps a phonetically evolved equivalent, for those Chipewyan who may be, in part, descendants of the Yellowknife branch and who have maintained their Indian heritage to a greater degree than those they indentified as Métis." There is little doubt that some Tatsanottine Dene have maintained that distinction through to this day.

Tazin Diversion

With the discovery, in 1930, of pitchblende (uranium oxide) in the southeast corner of Great Bear Lake prospectors quickly spread out over the north making discoveries on Yellowknife Bay (1934, gold) and on the north shore of Lake Athabasca (1934, gold and uranium). The Lake Athabasca gold discovery was developed by Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company (COMINCO, now Teck Cominco) during the mid-1930s. The nearby community of Goldfields was created and Cominco's Box Gold Mine began production in 1939. As part of this

¹⁹ Mason, J. Alden "Notes on the Indians of the Great Slave Lake" *Yale University Publications in Anthropology* 34, New Haven, Conn., 1946

²⁰ Gillespie, p. 289

development a dam was built at the outlet of White Lake, approximately 30 kilometres northwest of Goldfields. A 2.4 MW hydro station was built on Wellington Lake and water from White Lake was then diverted, presumably through a tunnel, to this station. A transmission line connected this Wellington Power Station with the mine and community at Goldfields but this only lasted a few years as the Box Gold Mine closed in 1942.

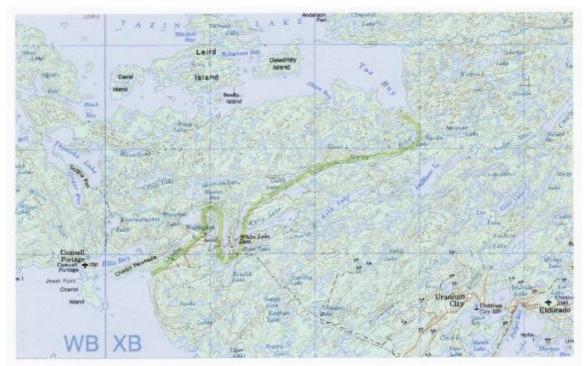
In 1949 Eldorado Mining and Refining Limited (a Crown Corporation) began to develop the uranium deposits in the Goldfields/Beaverlodge and Eldorado areas. In 1952, to house workers and their families, work began on the model northern community of Uranium City. Some of the buildings from the nearby abandoned community of Goldfields were moved to the new town site. To supply power to its mine operations and this community Eldorado Mining took over operation of the hydro station at Wellington Lake. Their mining and milling operation at Beaverlodge went into production in 1953. Two years later Gunnar Mines Limited, a private uranium mining company also began production in the Beaverlodge area and was followed, in 1957, by the Lorado Uranium Mine. Other small Beaverlodge mining operations, described in the literature as 'numerous', fed the Eldorado and Lorado mills.

The generation of electricity from the Wellington Power Station proved inadequate for this frenzy of mining activity on the north shore of Lake Athabasca. In 1958 Eldorado Mining developed a plan to divert water from Tazin Lake, north of Lake Athabasca, into the Garry River and through White Lake to the Wellington Power Station. They built an earth-fill dam at the west end of Tazin Lake (at 59° 48' N, 109° 25' W²¹) essentially preventing most or all water from entering the Tazin River. Raising the level of Tazin Lake allowed for the removal of water at Taz Bay (see map) on the southeast corner of the lake. This water, again presumably flowing through a tunnel, fed the Garry River and ended up in White Lake and then through the penstock to the Wellington Power Station continuing downstream through Waterloo Lake to the Charlot River. In 1959

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²¹ http://canadagazetteducanada.gc.ca/partl/2003/20031122/html/miscel-e.html

Eldorado Mining, with the available increased water flow, was able to add an additional 2.4 MW generator²² to their Wellington Power Station.



Portion of NTS 1:250,000 map sheet 74N showing the route of water diverted from Tazin Lake to Lake Athabasca.

In 1961 Eldorado again increased the generating capacity of the area by building a dam and power plant at the outlet of Waterloo Lake, a short distance downstream from their Wellington station. The Waterloo Power Station had a generating capacity of 8 MW.

In 1980 the generating capacity of the Garry/Charlot drainage system was again increased when Eldorado Mining, which by then was known as Eldorado Nuclear Ltd, built a dam and power station on the Charlot River downstream from Waterloo Lake. Two generating units, with a combined capacity of 10 MW, were installed at the Charlot Power Station bringing the total generating capacity of the entire system to just under 23 MW. The volume of water flowing through these three power plant (and much of it presumably diverted from Tazin Lake) is

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²² http://canaveral.scs.sk.ca/vol/HTT/Renewable/RRWater/Athabasca.htm

reported by Ghassemi and White²³ as 28 m³s⁻¹. This rate is elsewhere reported as 0.89 km³/year²⁴. By comparison the volume of water diverted from the Caniapiscau and East Main rivers into the La Grande River in Quebec is reported as 50.14 km³/year.

With the dramatic decline in the price of uranium in the early 1980s Eldorado Nuclear closed its mine near Uranium City. In 1982 much of the community was also closed and the Wellington, Waterloo and Charlot River Power Stations were mothballed. In the mid-1980s the Saskatchewan Power Corporation acquired these power stations, brought them back on line, and built a 138 kV transmission line connecting their output to the grid in southern Saskatchewan.

The effect of the 1958 construction of the dam blocking the natural outlet of Tazin Lake, and therefore providing the volume of water required to operate the power stations on the Charlot River drainage system, has been dramatic. In 1995 canoeists travelling across Tazin Lake and down the Tazin River described seeing a "large concrete dam blocking all drainage from [Tazin] lake" and after crossing this dam attempted to launch their canoes in the Tazin River immediately below the dam but found it was "four inches deep which included three inches of algae"25!

²³ Ghassemi, F and I. White Inter-Basin Water Transfer Case Studies Cambridge University Press 2007 (see Table 12.9 "Major inter-basin water diversion projects in Canada", p. 277)

http://209.85.173.104/search?g=cache:WolpcWL_pm8J:nwda.gov.in/writereaddata/sublinkimage s/9.pdf+%22Tazin+Lake%22&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=145&gl=ca

²⁵http://www.canoe.ca/che-mun/99list2.html