


Book Review: Aboriginal Power: clean energy and the future of Canada's first peoples by Chris Henderson

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2015/02/10/book-review-aboriginal-power-clean-energy-and-the-future-of-canadas-first-peoples-by-chris-henderson/

10/02/2015

Increasing the rate of Aboriginal energy deployment is a worthwhile and realizable task, and Henderson's book is an interesting and eminently readable elucidation of the potential opportunities available. For those interested in enticing cases of energy-related sustainable development (both in Canada and elsewhere), this is an excellent introduction that should not be missed, writes Joel Krupa.

Aboriginal Power: Clean energy and the future of Canada's first peoples.
Chris Henderson. John Denison Publishing. 2014.

When discussing global wealth, health, and power dynamics, it is common to neatly categorize nation-states as either "developed" or "developing". However, any student of inequality or observer of imbalances in geopolitics knows that many nuances of a country's situation are lost within such crude binary characterizations.

Differences in the definition of "wealth" (Bhutan, for one, emphasizes other elements of a citizen's prosperity), the ranges in what warrants the title of "developed" (wealthy Qataris enjoy over double the per capita gross national income of their more famous neighbour Saudi Arabia), and stratification in the development status of ethnic groups living within a country's borders (post-apartheid black South Africans still fare far worse than their white counterparts) are only some of the problems that plague the aforementioned simplified bifurcation of development designations.

South Africa is not the only example of this latter issue of intranational ethnic disparities, as many difficulties continue to plague indigenous communities living across the sprawling but rich northern country of Canada. Known as Aboriginals, these groups suffered from years of execrable colonialism and remain [vulnerable to problems](#). Systemic dysfunction is stubbornly persistent, but as Ottawa-based Chris Henderson argues in *Aboriginal Power: Clean Energy and the Future of Canada's First Peoples*, the status quo is changing.

Energized by a number of recent favourable legal cases and protected by strong constitutional rights, Aboriginal communities have the chance to capitalize on past successes and attain future sustainable development by taking a leadership role in the development of the renewable energy generation and transmission projects that will need to be built on their traditional territories over the coming years (Henderson cites a 2008 study that found over 8,000 prospective run-of-river water power sites in the Province of British Columbia alone). This book is a practitioner's how-to manual for taking a nascent sustainable development proposition from conception to fruition, highlighting how the underpinning confluence of greater environmental consciousness, aging infrastructure, power supply issues, and growing demand patterns make a clean energy transition almost certain.

The title "Aboriginal Power" carries many meanings. Henderson argues that "it refers to the power we need to light our homes and heat our schools...it recognizes the power of governments, businesses, and utilities to advance sustainable energy...it demonstrates the power held by First Nations, Metis, and Inuit communities...[and it] addresses the power that comes when a nation's progress is truly based on the ideals of fair play, justice and equal opportunity for all". Meeting this lofty vision is the tricky part, with no uniformly applicable solutions in sight. However, some recurring points are found in case studies of successful projects. Internally, certain steps should be taken – stable corporate governance, the building of community support, a separation of politics and business, a dogged belief that the end goal is achievable – to realize success. Externally, government support is essential for further catalyzing expansion, while all private sectors players need to be proactive in their engagement as they awaken to the reality that, going forward, resource projects of all sorts will be heavily reliant on Aboriginal approval.

As he relays these occasionally frank messages, Henderson humanizes his insights by weaving in personal stories from Aboriginal leaders already responsible for leading an energy asset's development.

Pitfalls in this journey are, alas, common. Henderson makes it abundantly clear that ubiquitous Aboriginal energy projects are still a way off. Even assuming a project can overcome the bevy of issues that traditionally hinder early-stage new energy infrastructure builds, community political conflagrations, a troubling lack of human capacity, and cash shortages are only the beginning of the many hurdles that can bedevil Aboriginal-specific initiatives. Going forward, more work needs to be done to bring down these barriers, and momentum must be maintained.

Despite a host of strengths, the book does have some shortcomings. For one, Henderson has a distinct affinity for confusing and sometimes tiresome arrow-laden graphs (perhaps unsurprising, given his role as an expert consultant). Moreover, his largely bullish view on the criticality of wind and large-hydro as bulwarks for Canada's future energy supply is not necessarily optimal, as is his lack of attention to the potential applications of larger-scale solar. Wind energy, for example, can be difficult for grid operators to manage if it is not optimally geographically dispersed, while the very inclusion of large-hydro as a necessary carbon-free resource is debatable ([Demarty et al., 2009](#), even found that – contrary to popular belief – some carbon emissions do occur at certain large hydro sites). Solar, meanwhile, could be an important niche contributor to power needs (and important Aboriginal economic development driver – [McClaughlin et al., 2010](#)), especially given that system output tends to match summer load patterns well and many component costs have fallen rapidly. Finally, insufficient attention is paid to the role that the communities themselves will need to play in this exciting clean energy transition, especially when democratically electing their representatives. In far too many cases, inexperienced, unaccountable, or lackadaisical leadership has been allowed to hold on to decision-making authority – with predictably disastrous consequences. This trend must be reversed, ideally through the rise of clever and empowered young Aboriginal men and women with a solid grasp of the pressing issues and a passion for durable change.

However, these critiques are relatively minor. Increasing the rate of Aboriginal energy deployment is a worthwhile and realizable task that has been argued elsewhere, and Henderson's book is an interesting and eminently readable elucidation of the potential opportunities available. For those interested in enticing cases of energy-related sustainable development (both in Canada and elsewhere), this is an excellent introduction that should not be missed.

Joel Krupa is an energy and environment researcher at the University of Toronto, studying under Dr. Danny Harvey. He was educated at Oxford. [Read more reviews by Joel.](#)

- Copyright 2013 LSE Review of Books