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11/27/2000 07:23 AM

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cc:

Subject: What kind of life is it in Sheshatshiu?

fyi.

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What kind of life is it in Sheshatshiu?

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HEAD: What kind of life is it in Sheshatshiu?

When television networks showed pictures of gasoline-sniffing *native* youths in Labrador this month, many Canadians were shocked. They should not have been. The Innu communities of Labrador have been plagued by alcohol and solvent abuse for many years.

The problem came to national attention in 1993 when six children in Davis Inlet were caught on videotape as they huddled in an unheated shack, high on gasoline fumes and screaming that they wanted to die. The latest pictures were just as disturbing. They showed groups of children, dazed and incoherent, sniffing gasoline from plastic garbage bags. The desperation of these children, some as young as 6, can only be imagined. What can be done to help them?

The usual solutions have been trotted out. The Newfoundland government suggested providing treatment and counselling in Sheshatshiu, the community of 1,200 where the children live. Local Innu leaders suggested providing treatment and counselling in nearby Goose Bay, where 12 of the children were finally taken last week.

But treatment and counselling are little more than a Band-Aid on a gaping wound. Does anyone really think they will succeed? Does anyone

really doubt that a year from now children will be huddling again beside the crude gravel roads of Sheshatshiu, breathing fumes from a bag?

The Innu settlements of Labrador are troubled, dysfunctional communities. The suicide rate in one of them, Nain, is 20 times the national average. Alcoholism and substance abuse are rampant. So are wife abuse and child abuse. Many of the children who are sniffing gas today have parents who drink and sniff themselves.

The sources of this *social* collapse are as complex as the history of *natives* and Europeans in Canada. But one of those sources, surely, is isolation. The Innu communities of Labrador are scattered along the harsh northern coast, inaccessible by road and cut off for most of the year. The traditional means of livelihood, hunting and fishing, are dying out. No viable modern economy exists, so, like many other *native* communities, the Innu depend heavily on government support.

Thanks to videos and satellite television, children know all about the modern world outside, but cannot take part in it. Boredom, unemployment, absent or troubled parents -- all lead young people inexorably down the road to desperation, addiction and, sometimes, self-destruction. Only last year, a 16-year-old boy high on gasoline fumes set himself on fire during an argument with his girlfriend and suffered terrible burns.

Breaking this pattern will mean more than better counselling and treatment facilities. It will mean more than better *houses* or bigger community centres. It will mean more than a *native*-run justice system or even *native* self-government. It will mean asking hard, practical questions about isolated *native* communities such as Sheshatshiu.

Does it make sense, in the year 2000, for people to be living a marginal existence in such a remote place? Would it be better for its residents to move to bigger communities where there might be jobs to be had? Isn't it time they joined the modern world?

Many *native* leaders will bridle at the very suggestion. They will point to the notorious forced relocations of *native* communities in the past and insist on their right to live where the ancestors did. But what kind of life is it when your kids sniff gas by the roadside?

It is time to face facts. Places such as Sheshatshiu are a prison for many of their residents and a death sentence for scores of their children. They must find a way to enter the modern world, even it means moving somewhere else.

ADDED SEARCH TERMS:

GEOGRAPHIC NAME: Sheshatshiu; Davis Inlet
SUBJECT TERM: youth; illegal drugs; gasoline; *health*
care

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