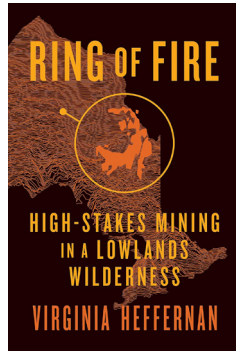


## Ring of Fire: High-Stakes Mining in a Lowlands Wilderness

By Virginia Heffernan. 2023. ECW Press. 224 pages, 26.95 CAD, Paper, 16.99 CAD, E-book.

The subject of Virginia Heffernan's book *Ring of Fire* is a 5000 km<sup>2</sup> crescent-shaped geological formation in the Hudson Bay Lowlands on the southern coasts of Hudson Bay and James Bay featuring some of the densest critical mineral concentrations in the world. Governments seeking to meet their 2015 Paris Agreement commitments identify these rich deposits as essential to the transition from fossil fuel to climate-neutral energy production. This combination of rich deposits and global demand creates an attractive economic opportunity for the mining industry. Mining promoter and Johnny Cash fan, Richard Nemis, coined the name "Ring of Fire" for this formation when he discovered it in 2007 to highlight its resource potential and attract investment. The Hudson Bay Lowlands is also home to several Indigenous communities that recognize the opportunity and uncertainty that mining will bring. The tensions within and among the mining industry, Indigenous communities, and governments trying to balance the social, economic, and environmental costs and benefits of the Ring of Fire proposal is the main theme of this book.



The Ring of Fire is a new mining venture occurring at a time when environmental and social considerations are becoming a greater part of the political landscape, and court decisions are supporting Indigenous treaty rights. Heffernan proposes that there is an opportunity to create an ecological and social model for energy transition projects that "outweigh the environmental and social costs" (p. 9). She sets the book's tone by noting that failure to develop and apply such a model would be "irresponsible to all stakeholders" (p. 9).

The area's natural history is briefly and clearly covered in two chapters. Chapter 1 describes the geological history of the Ring of Fire, and Chapter 7 discusses the importance of the peat covering these mineral deposits for storing carbon and mitigating climate change. Readers interested in natural history will likely be familiar with this ecological background, but those seeking to understand how varying social and economic objectives influence decisions on whether and how mining proposals proceed will find an important introduction in this book.

Chapters 2 to 5 and 11 focus on tensions within

the mining industry. The industry operates in high-risk boom and bust cycles resulting from narrow time frames for mining project exploration, promotion, and financial deals. As explained throughout the book, time frames are additionally narrowed by government-led consultation, assessment, and decision processes. The dichotomies within Indigenous communities, described in Chapters 6 and 9, are exacerbated by these narrow time frames. During the Berger Commission's Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry, Indigenous peoples were united in demanding that land claims be settled before pipelines were considered (Berger 1977). As Heffernan explains, Indigenous communities are now divided over the immediate economic gain of mining proposals versus demands for basic necessities (such as clean water, adequate housing, food safety, and health facilities) before consideration of these proposals. A legacy of broken promises, tailings dam failures, and understated environmental effects has created a lack of trust in new mining industry proposals and government promises.

Courts have typically upheld the requirement for governments to consult with Indigenous communities prior to approving mining operations. However, as the following examples illustrate, different understandings of the meaning and role of consultation has caused divisions within Indigenous communities and uncertainty for government decision-makers.

Jean Paul Gladu from Sand Point First Nation (Bingwi Neyaashi Anishinaabek) provides context for these disagreements in Chapter 6, *Whose Land? Our Land*:

I must also question why our communities need 100 percent support for any project to be deemed credible. We are not a monolith; of course, as in any culture, we too have disagreements. Why are we held to an unreasonable and quite frankly unattainable standard when our current federal system can see a government make decisions on behalf of our entire country with often sub-50 percent support? (p. 93)

In Chapter 9, *A Tale of Two Provinces*, Chief Vernon Morris of the Oji-Cree Muskrat Dam First Nation describes an important meaning that consultation holds for other Indigenous community members:

The government's view of duty to consult is that there will be basis for discussions to begin for planning and development. Our interpretation of the duty to consult is that we have a right to say 'No' when the actions for

development will have a harmful effect or no benefit to our First Nation. (p. 130)

Against a background of these differing interpretations and objectives, Heffernan explains how mining can improve regional and Indigenous community economic prospects using examples provided in Chapters 5, 6, 8, and 9.

Heffernan uses a conversational style with many asides to present the book's information. This style requires the reader to make topical notes and track connections to understand the nuances behind the issues and consider a framework for the future. Heffernan presents a few possible routes to this future. Among these is the *Canadian Impact Assessment Act* (CIAA), which passed in 2019 and repealed the *Canadian Environmental Assessment Act* (CEAA) of 2012. The 2012 legislation was exclusively aimed at determining a project's environmental impacts. The CIAA of 2019 expanded the role of assessment to include not only environmental, but also economic, social, and health impacts and mandated that the federal government lead all project reviews. After publication of the book in 2023, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled (in October 2023) that the CIAA is largely unconstitutional because it falls outside federal legislative jurisdiction (Supreme Court 2023). The government is currently working on amending the Act to respect provincial areas of jurisdiction and to ensure that opportunities for engagement of Indigenous peoples are still provided (ECCC 2023). Heffernan concludes the book with proposals for several mitigative actions for consideration in future impact assessments.

The overall message is that decision-makers with the ability to create models that incorporate each participant's varying objectives and interpretations will be able to implement proposals that outweigh the

environmental and social costs of mining. Readers interested in these issues will find many sources in the book's notes to deepen their understanding of critical mineral mining proposals in Canada and elsewhere. Two recently released books helped me appreciate the context for the critical mining issues raised in Heffernan's *Ring of Fire*. The first was, *Cobalt: Cradle of the Demon Metals, Birth of a Mining Superpower* by Charlie Angus (House of Anansi Press, 2022), which covers the mining rush in Cobalt in the early 1900s and gives a historical perspective on current mining proposals like the Ring of Fire. The second was *True North Rising: My Fifty-Year Journey with the Inuit and Dene Leaders who Transformed Canada's North* by Whit Fraser (Random House Canada, 2023). This book provides an excellent summary of the innovative Indigenous consultation during the Berger Commission for the Mackenzie Valley pipeline question in the 1970s.

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