

The Petitcodiac Divide: An Expert Analysis of Structural Violence, Environmental Racism, and the Petitcodiac River Causeway (1968–2021)

Executive Summary: Findings on Intent, Impact, and Accountability

The 1968 construction of the Petitcodiac River Causeway, connecting Moncton and Riverview, New Brunswick, was officially framed as an initiative to achieve specific economic objectives: the provision of a crucial highway link across the estuary and the protection of upstream agricultural lands from destructive high tides. Analysis of the available public records does not reveal explicit, premeditated intent by state actors to fulfill the strict legal criterion of genocide (the intent to destroy a group *as such*).

However, a rigorous examination of the infrastructure's long-term effects leads to the conclusion that the causeway, particularly through its **42 years of policy-supported operation and maintenance (1968–2010)**, functioned as a powerful instrument of **structural violence and environmental racism**. By acting as a complete physical barrier, the causeway severely compromised the river's hydrodynamics and resulted in the documented collapse of traditional sustenance fisheries, quantified by an 82 percent reduction in salmon catches. This systemic resource denial directly targeted the foundation of the Mi'kmaq and Acadian populations' food sovereignty and cultural livelihood. Given that these communities were already structurally disadvantaged, the policy decision leveraged existing inequalities.

Therefore, while not a conventional weapon of war, the Petitcodiac Causeway functioned as a protracted **involuntary environmental weapon**. It inflicted genocidal *effects* by deliberately imposing environmental conditions—through sustained institutional neglect and political indifference—that were calculated to destroy the basis of a traditional way of life, a phenomenon that aligns with cultural genocide and the severe outcome of systemic structural violence.

I. Introduction: Framing the Inquiry and Defining the Terms of Conflict

A. The Petitcodiac Estuary: Geography, Hydrology, and the Tidal Bore Phenomenon

The Petitcodiac River is ecologically unique, defined by its status as a highly dynamic, macrotidal estuary system. This geography allows for extreme tidal fluctuations, which naturally create the phenomenon known as the tidal bore. The immense force and volume of the incoming tides are critical drivers for the overall ecology of the river and its capacity to sustain life.

The river's natural dynamism was its greatest strength, supporting complex ecosystems, including vital fish migrations. However, this same dynamism meant that the intervention of a fixed barrier, such as the causeway, was inherently disruptive to the delicate balance of sediment transport and water flow. The inevitable negative impact of the causeway on the tidal bore, which was eventually reduced due to sediment accumulation, served as an early indicator of the deeper ecological disruption that would follow. The engineering paradigm applied in the 1960s prioritized linear, predictable outcomes, such as sustained traffic flow and flood control, over the preservation of complex, resilient ecosystems like the thriving fishery and the integrity of the bore.

B. Defining Structural Violence and Environmental Racism in the Canadian Context

To analyze the profound impact of the causeway, it is essential to employ established socio-legal frameworks. **Structural violence** refers to the systemic harm inflicted by institutions and policies that prevent specific groups from meeting their basic needs, regardless of the individual malicious intent of the specific decision-makers. This framework explains how economic and political structures dictate access to essential social determinants of health, including food security and income stability.

The related framework of **environmental racism** describes the disproportionate exposure of racialized groups—specifically Black and Indigenous communities in the Atlantic region—to harmful, hazardous, or toxic activities and pollutants. In the case of the Petitcodiac, the denial of the river's bounty fits this framework as a form of resource deprivation. The policy decision that led to the construction and maintenance of the causeway explicitly prioritized settler interests, namely agricultural protection and transport infrastructure, over the fundamental sustenance needs and treaty rights of the Mi'kmaq and Acadian rightsholders. This demonstrates how institutional preference can generate racially stratified environmental burdens.

When evaluating the user's reference to genocide, it is noted that certain advocacy groups, such as the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), recognize that systemic violence and the sustained denial of human rights can collectively *amount to* genocide against marginalized groups. While this language is powerful advocacy, the report adheres to the legal distinction that structural violence does not require the specific legal intent necessary for prosecution under the UN Genocide Convention.

C. The Scope of the Investigation: Intent, Action, and the Question of Genocide

The objective of this investigation is to move beyond the documented economic rationale and assess the institutional behavior regarding the causeway's predictable negative consequences. The central task is to determine if the sustained operation of the structure, in the face of mounting evidence of ecological collapse, represented **willful blindness or negligent disregard** toward the rightsholder populations.

The core finding is that the causeway, through institutional inertia and political decisions spanning over four decades, transitioned from being a development project with adverse side effects into a systemic instrument of sustained, policy-based harm. The prolonged maintenance of the blockage, long after the harm was scientifically undeniable, confirmed that the political priority remained economic convenience and avoiding the costly fix, thereby making the ensuing

harm an enduring component of the government's operational policy.

II. The River as Sustenance: Mi'kmaq and Acadian Ecological Relationship

A. Historical Mi'kmaw Presence and the Significance of *Mi'kma'ki*

The Mi'kmaq Nation's relationship with the land and water of *Mi'kma'ki* is ancient, spanning over 13,500 years. Permanent seasonal encampments were established strategically near the ocean and along rivers like the Petitcodiac to capitalize on spawning runs and rich fishing grounds.

This practice ensured food security and cultural continuity across generations.

The river provided diverse and essential resources for sustenance, including critical anadromous species such as gaspereau, salmon, and sturgeon. The nature of anadromous species—which migrate between salt and fresh water—made the causeway blockage an existential threat, as it severed the biological connection necessary for the life cycle of the species and the associated human dependency. Traditional Mi'kmaw fishing methods, including various weir-fishing techniques, embody a sophisticated, generational understanding of the river's ecology. The destruction of the fishery is thus understood not only as an economic loss but as a profound assault on traditional knowledge and cultural identity, which are passed down through the practice of fishing. The fishery was characterized as being "essential to life," indicating that the resource was not merely a commodity but the very foundation for food sovereignty and autonomy.

B. The Acadian Legacy and Resource Access in the Petitcodiac Region

Acadian settlers, having established communities in the region, also relied heavily on the estuary's biological productivity. Early interactions between Acadians and the Mi'kmaq often involved resource sharing. This shared history, however, is marked by colonial violence.

Acadians themselves faced resource deprivation as a strategy of war, exemplified by the British attack and burning of Acadian fishing settlements during the 1718 *Squirrel Affair*, where certain individuals were executed and others imprisoned. This history creates a context where Acadian populations were already historically vulnerable to the denial of sustenance resources. The loss of the Petitcodiac fishery due to the causeway, while occurring in a non-military context, replicated this historical pattern of eliminating core resources to subordinate or displace marginalized communities, thereby rooting the infrastructure decision in a long-standing colonial tradition of resource control.

C. Treaty Rights and the Pre-1968 Status Quo

The Mi'kmaq Nation holds rights affirmed by historical treaties, including the Peace and Friendship Treaties of 1725, 1761, and 1762. These agreements affirmed the rights of the Mi'kmaq to engage in traditional activities, including fishing. The construction of the causeway in 1968, which directly and catastrophically undermined the ability to fish, was an act of Crown infringement on established Aboriginal and Treaty rights, undertaken without consent or adequate mitigation. This policy action demonstrated the long-standing colonial practice of

subordinating traditional resource rights to the dominant interests of settler economic development.

III. Rationale and Rhetoric: The Political Approval of the 1968 Causeway

A. The Official Mandate: Economic Development and Land Protection

The public record for the 1968 Petitcodiac River Causeway construction points to two primary drivers. First, the project was intended to provide a convenient highway link between Moncton and Riverview, facilitating commerce and transportation. Second, it aimed to protect upstream agricultural lands from flooding associated with high tides. The federal government was heavily involved, as it had traditionally maintained the dykes in the area, and critically, it was willing to fund the \$3 million project.

This financial calculus played a significant role in solidifying the political decision. The government leveraged federal funding to subsidize the destruction of a traditional, non-market resource—the fishery—while simultaneously reinforcing colonial priorities by prioritizing specific settler agricultural and transportation interests. This systemic use of capital flow to reinforce colonial priorities is itself a sophisticated form of structural violence.

B. Analysis of Intentional Choking vs. Deliberate Disregard

While the user query implies explicit malice, the available OSINT material does not support a finding that the causeway was built with the direct, overt intent "to fuck with" the local populations. Instead, the data suggests the project was driven by standard government rationales of economic utility and flood control.

However, the evidence strongly supports a finding of **deliberate disregard**. The project faced opposition from environmentalists from its inception, who raised clear concerns about potential silt deposits and negative impacts on fish migration. The catastrophic 82 percent reduction in salmon catches demonstrates that these risks were realized. The planners either exhibited gross negligence or consciously determined that the ecological cost was acceptable because that cost would be disproportionately borne by marginalized populations lacking political power. This conscious devaluation of rightsholder resources is functionally equivalent to the structural harm alleged in the query.

C. The Prolonged Maintenance (1968–2010): Systemic Indifference

The most compelling evidence of systemic violence is not the initial construction, but the causeway's longevity. The political choice to maintain the barrier for over four decades, despite years of protest and unequivocal scientific proof of ecological devastation—including the river being designated Canada's most endangered by 2003 —confirms that institutional priority remained fixed on avoiding the disruption and cost of remediation. The decision to continue operating the structure while knowing the fishery was dying represents a fundamental ethical failure, transforming an initial engineering mistake into a prolonged policy of environmental racism and policy-based resource denial.

Table 1: Petitcodiac River Causeway: Chronology of Rationale, Impact, and Structural Violence

Phase	Time Period	Primary Rationale/Action	Key Impact on Fishery/Ecology	Structural Violence Analysis	Source(s)
Planning & Construction	1960s – 1968	Highway link and upstream agricultural protection; \$3M federal funding.	Restricted fish movement; immediate environmental opposition.	Prioritization of settler economy over sustenance rights.	
Peak Restriction (Structural Violence)	1968 – 2010	Maintained operation for flood control and traffic flow.	82% decline in salmon; sedimentation; river declared most endangered (2003).	Prolonged systemic indifference and denial of access to essential resources.	
Restoration Initiative	2008 – 2021	\$68M project; gate opening (2010); bridge replacement (2021).	Improved water quality; acknowledgment of rightsholders (Fort Folly FN).	Remediation as a costly, belated response to decades of policy failure.	

IV. Ecological Weaponization: The Scientific Effects of Obstruction

A. Hydrological Engineering Failure: Sedimentation and the Collapse of the Tidal Bore

The causeway's design proved inadequate for the Petitcodiac's intense tidal environment. The fixed structure severely curtailed the natural tidal exchange, leading to chronic and extensive sediment accumulation. This silt buildup physically choked the river channel and dramatically reduced the magnitude of the celebrated tidal bore. The diminishing of the bore was a highly visible manifestation of the river's overall degradation and a direct consequence of the 20th-century engineering model that sought to conquer, rather than accommodate, nature. This fundamental failure demonstrates the high cost of ecological ignorance. The need for decades of scientific studies and Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) to determine remediation strategies confirms that the original project was approved based on a limited worldview that privileged engineering certainty (a fixed road) over ecological complexity (a dynamic estuary).

B. The Bio-Abolition: Impact on Anadromous Fish Migration

The causeway's construction was the proximate catastrophic event leading to the effective abolition of the sustenance fishery. By physically blocking the upstream migration of anadromous species—which include crucial food sources like salmon and gaspereau—the structure directly impacted the biological engine of the estuary. The quantified ecological catastrophe is the documented 82 percent decline in regional salmon

catches. This reduction is so steep and so complete that it must be considered **bio-abolition**—the infrastructure successfully eliminated the biological resource capacity of the river. Although some decline in fisheries stock had occurred previously, the causeway delivered the definitive blow, confirming its efficacy as a destroyer of biological sustenance resources. The infrastructure thus acted as an environmental force multiplier, disrupting the hydrodynamics necessary for the river’s natural flow and magnifying the damage caused by external factors like industrial pollution.

C. Water Quality Degradation and Designation as Canada’s Most Endangered River

The altered hydrology of the Petitcodiac created a semi-stagnant environment upstream of the barrier. This lack of tidal flushing exacerbated the effects of industrial expansion in the region, resulting in severely degraded water quality. The sustained health hazards and ecological breakdown led to the river's high-profile designation in 2003 as the most endangered river in Canada. This designation served as a potent, national condemnation of the infrastructure project and the negligence of the governmental authorities responsible for its maintenance.

Table 2: Quantification of Ecological Collapse due to Causeway Restriction (1968–2010)

Ecological Metric	Pre-1968 Baseline (Traditional Use)	Post-1968 Quantified Impact	Impact Severity	Source(s)
Anadromous Fish Catch (Salmon)	Sustenance/Commercial Level	82% Reduction Reported	Catastrophic Resource Denial	
Water Quality Index	Moderate to High	Dropped significantly due to industrial expansion and flow restriction	Severe Public Health and Ecosystem Hazard	
Tidal Bore Magnitude	High (Significant cultural/natural feature)	Reduced by Sedimentation	Profound Hydrological and Cultural Loss	
Ecological Status (2003)	Healthy/Viable Estuary	Declared Canada’s Most Endangered River	National Ecological Disaster	

V. Structural Damage: Environmental Racism and the Socio-Economic Fallout

A. Linking Ecological Collapse to Mi’kmaq and Acadian Food Insecurity

The destruction of the Petitcodiac fishery removed a reliable, traditional source of protein and food sovereignty for the Mi’kmaq and Acadian communities. This ecological catastrophe increased the forced dependence of these populations on market-based food systems, thereby accelerating socioeconomic decline.

The loss of the fishery did not occur in a vacuum; it targeted communities already vulnerable due to systemic structural disadvantages. Socio-environmental analysis confirms that poverty, income stability, and food access are key structural determinants of health, and Mi’kmaq communities already face significantly higher rates of these vulnerabilities. For instance,

Mi'kmaw people living on reserve faced an unemployment rate of 24.6 percent in the 2006 census, compared to 9.1 percent for all Nova Scotians. By damaging the primary resource base, the causeway compounded pre-existing disadvantages, weakening the communities' ability to sustain themselves autonomously.

B. Analysis under the Framework of Environmental Racism

The outcome of the causeway project provides a textbook example of environmental racism. A governmental action—the infrastructure project—resulted in the disproportionate infliction of ecological harm (an 82 percent loss of a crucial sustenance fishery) upon specific racial and ethnic minorities (Mi'kmaq and Acadians). Concurrently, the immediate, tangible benefits (a highway connection and dry farmland) flowed primarily to the politically dominant settler population.

The inherent mechanism of this racism was the systemic institutional preference that valued settler agricultural interests, often subsidized and historically rooted in colonial land acquisition and dyking, over the recognized Aboriginal and historical resource rights of the Mi'kmaq and Acadians. This act of prioritization reinforced racial hierarchies of resource access and control. Furthermore, the destruction of the river's viability reduced the capacity for traditional life on the land, creating economic pressure that encouraged migration to urban centers or entry into mainstream wage economies, thereby functioning as an indirect mechanism of cultural assimilation.

C. Perpetuation of Structural Disadvantage

The connection between chronic economic deprivation and adverse health outcomes is well-documented. By compromising the economic and nutritional foundation of these communities, the causeway indirectly contributed to the persistence of negative structural determinants of health and well-being. This ongoing systemic harm, often referred to as "slow violence," is difficult to attribute to a single actor or date, allowing successive governments to evade responsibility for decades. This invisibility of systemic violence is key to the endurance of environmental racism.

Table 3: The Causeway's Impact Through the Lens of Structural Violence

 Structural Violence Criteria	 Application to Petitcodiac Causeway	 Evidence and Significance	 Source(s)	 --- --- --- 	 Systemic Resource Denial
	Infrastructure removed the biological means of sustenance for Mi'kmaq and Acadians.	82% salmon reduction ; Fishing was central to Mi'kmaw life.			
	 Institutionalized Disregard	Decision-makers ignored known risks and prolonged the harm for decades.			
	Opposition ignored in 1968 ; 42 years of maintaining status quo after damage was clear.				
	 Compounding Vulnerability	Ecological destruction exacerbated pre-existing economic and health disparities.			
	Mi'kmaw communities already facing high poverty rates (24.6% unemployment).				
	 Colonial Prioritization	Valuing settler infrastructure (highway/agriculture) above traditional resource economies.			
	Federal funding focused on highway/dyke maintenance.				

VI. The Apex of Conflict: Analyzing the Genocide Claim

A. Legal Definition vs. Genocidal Effect

The user's query asks if the causeway is effectively a weapon of genocide. Legally, the UN Convention requires specific *intent* to destroy the group, known as *dolus specialis*. While the historical rhetoric often focuses on government convenience, the crucial point lies in the policy choices made *after* the ecological destruction was known.

The sustained political decision to ignore environmental and community protests and maintain the structure for over four decades, even as the fishery collapsed, transcends mere negligence. By 1980, the provincial and federal governments were aware of the destruction. The choice to continue the destruction for four decades represents the point at which systemic indifference hardened into a deliberate political policy that perpetuated the suffering of rightsholder communities.

This sustained policy aligns directly with the UN Article II (c) definition of genocide: "deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part." The systemic denial of a core sustenance resource, leading to a profound collapse of food security, satisfies the criteria for inflicting destructive conditions upon the group's way of life.

B. The Concept of Cultural Genocide and Slow Violence

The impact of the causeway is most accurately characterized as a consequence of **cultural genocide** facilitated by **slow violence**. It systematically undermined the cultural continuity, traditional knowledge, and food sovereignty of the Mi'kmaq and Acadians by eliminating the biological foundation upon which their millennia-old identities and practices depended.

The advocacy position that structural violence "amounted to a genocide" serves as a powerful political and moral indictment of the cumulative severity of the harm. It emphasizes that the sustained destruction of the life-supporting environment for a historically targeted group generates genocidal risk and catastrophic outcomes, even if the original motivation was economic.

C. The Weaponization of Infrastructure

Ultimately, the causeway was **effectively a weapon** because it was instrumental in causing massive, sustained, and targeted damage to the sustenance base of defined, marginalized populations. It achieved a strategic objective—biological resource control—in service of prioritizing settler economic goals (transport and agriculture). Modern infrastructure planning, particularly near rightsholder territories, must now incorporate a Genocidal Risk Assessment to avoid repeating such historical policy failures, where the elimination of a resource crucial to a group's survival is allowed to proceed unchecked.

VII. Remediation, Accountability, and the Restoration Project (2008-2021)

A. The Turning Point: Advocacy and Political Shift

The political shift toward addressing the causeway was a direct result of decades of persistent

opposition from environmental groups and the high-profile designation of the Petitcodiac as Canada's most endangered river. The eventual decision to proceed with remediation was framed with a crucial "climate change lens," signaling a necessary evolution in governmental priorities toward long-term environmental resilience and sustainability.

B. The Act of Rectification: Bridge Replacement and Tidal Restoration

The restoration initiative was a massive, multi-year, \$68 million project that commenced in 2008. The key milestones included the permanent opening of the causeway gates in 2010 and the eventual replacement of the causeway structure with a 240-meter, four-lane bridge in September 2021.

The goal of this comprehensive restoration was the reversal of the bio-abolition and sedimentation effects of the 1968 barrier. Outcomes already observed or targeted include improved fish habitat, enhanced water quality due to increased tidal water volume, and better protection of agricultural land through the construction of approximately 23 kilometers of new dikes. This immense financial outlay quantifies the deferred social and ecological debt incurred by the initial act of structural violence. The repair cost (estimated \$68 million) relative to the original construction cost (estimated \$3 million) provides a powerful economic case against environmentally and socially negligent infrastructure planning, representing a ratio of remediation to initial cost exceeding 22:1.

C. Acknowledging Rightsholders and Shared Goals

The rhetoric surrounding the opening of the new bridge reflected a significant departure from the 1968 planning structure. Transportation and Infrastructure Minister Jill Green specifically stated that the river's restoration had been a "common and uniting goal for the communities, levels of government, stakeholders and **rightsholders**".

Crucially, the restoration process included institutionalized cooperation with the Mi'kmaq Nation, specifically noting that fish studies were conducted by the Fort Folly First Nation. This inclusion, though decades belated, signals that the government recognized the need to move beyond mere stakeholder consultation to the formal acknowledgment of Indigenous rights. The involvement of Fort Folly First Nation suggests that the remediation project was viewed by authorities not just as an engineering feat but as a necessary step toward reconciliation, tacitly acknowledging the previous error of exclusion and the subsequent harm caused by colonial structures of governance.

VIII. Conclusion: Synthesis of Findings and Recommendations for Truth and Accountability

Synthesis of Findings

The Petitcodiac River Causeway was an infrastructure project built primarily for economic and political expediency. While the public record lacks evidence of explicit genocidal intent, the sustained maintenance of the structure for 42 years, despite clear evidence of ecological disaster and resource deprivation, resulted in systematic harm that qualifies as a severe case of **structural violence and environmental racism**. The destruction of the sustenance fishery

(82% loss) inflicted conditions calculated to destroy the food sovereignty and cultural foundation of the Mi'kmaq and Acadian communities, thereby achieving **genocidal effects** through policy-based indifference. Accountability rests not only with the initial planners but with all subsequent political administrations that willfully upheld the ecologically devastating status quo.

Recommendations for Future Infrastructure Governance

Based on the analysis of the Petitcodiac failure and subsequent remediation, the following recommendations are proposed to prevent future occurrences of structural violence through infrastructure projects:

1. **Mandatory Integrated Environmental and Socio-Cultural Impact Assessments (ESCIA's):** All major infrastructure projects must be subject to rigorous ESCIA's that fully integrate Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) from Indigenous rightsholders at the project's inception. These assessments must project harm not just to the ecosystem, but specifically to the cultural continuity, food sovereignty, and structural determinants of health for marginalized communities.
2. **Sovereign Consultation and Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC):** Governments must implement and respect robust mechanisms for Indigenous consultation, ensuring that rightsholders possess the necessary political power, including effective veto authority, over projects that pose an existential threat to their traditional resource base or communal well-being.
3. **Establishment of Restorative Justice Mechanisms:** A formal mechanism must be established to calculate and deliver comprehensive compensation to Mi'kmaq and Acadian communities for the historical, quantifiable loss of livelihood, food security, and cultural practice caused by the causeway's 42 years of structurally violent operation. This mechanism should acknowledge the estimated \$68 million remediation cost as a measure of the debt owed for deferred environmental and social responsibility.

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