Carbon Offsets and Trading: A logic that violates Indigenous and human rights

For the majority of people in the Global North, little attention was given to the details of the recently signed agreement during the UN climate talks in Paris last December, sans a mention on the national news or a blurb on social media. Those who have been paying attention and attempting to highlight the incongruities of the details in the Paris Agreement, and the long history of these negotiations, beginning with the Kyoto Protocol, are largely from Indigenous and front line communities. Those surrounded by oil and gas drilling, transport, manufacture of deadly chemicals and petroleum byproducts, and monoculture industrial farming.

“In the face of the climate crisis Indigenous Peoples are both on the front lines of the impacts of climate change, and at the forefront of the battles to keep fossil fuels in the ground. The Paris Agreement, as it stands, undermines the sovereignty of Indigenous Peoples globally and pushes forward false solutions to the climate crisis.”

Indigenous Environmental Network (1)

The content of the Paris agreement in reality is based on a purely capitalistic model that eliminates Indigenous and human rights. This glaring omission, as it appears, is to preemptively absolve any violations that may occur as corporations and governments designate Indigenous and traditional lands for carbon sinks and offsets - a dangerous shell game where emissions at their source in the Global North are “compensated” in the Global South by among others, commodifying forests -, as well as for further extraction.Flooding, drought, and widespread agricultural and animal borne diseases are becoming more severe, limiting subsistence resources, and threatening food sovereignty. In the Global North, entire villages along coastal regions are losing land mass to rising ocean levels – lands that they have inhabited for countless generations and which hold great cultural and spiritual significance, calling into question their future survival as a unique race.

“Since 1932, south Louisiana [United States] has lost over 1,900 square miles (3,058 square km). They say every hour an acre is lost from our shores. We are experiencing more violent and frequent hurricanes and tropical storms and higher surges of water. Hurricane Katrina was not the first and we have had multiple storms since and we know there will be more to come... Sea levels are rising and the 10,000+ miles [17,000+ km] of oil and gas canals dredged by the industry for natural resources extraction has left our wetlands in a state of irreparable loss. Freshwaters no longer regularly flood our territory, saltwater instead singes our shores, killing the biodiversity and forcing coastal communities to migrate to higher grounds. They say communities will have be sacrificed and those communities at the ends of the road where the Houma once found refugee is now turning into open waters.”

Monique M Verdin, Paris 2015, from the Indigenous Houma nation, Louisiana (2)

Another glaring omission in the Paris agreement are mandates to reduce fossil fuels extraction. Instead, “green economy” schemes, like the United Nations/World Bank’s REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation) programs, will provide the financial mechanisms for industrialized nations to justify expansion of fossil fuel regimes.Indigenous and front line communities, where industry and fossil fuel extraction is concentrated, are threatened by the pollution that continues to flow into the very air they breathe and the water they drink. Canada’s controversial tar sands, a massive oil extraction project in Northern Alberta, offshore drilling in Alaska’s outer continental shelf, and hydraulic fracturing in North Dakota are just three examples that disproportionately impact Indigenous Peoples of the North.

“As Denedeh people of the North and the Arctic we have already experienced a 2 degree shift and real impacts of climate change. We are also downstream from the largest industrial project on the planet, the Alberta Tar Sands, that are compounding climate change impacts through the contamination and degradation to the lands we rely on. We need more than written or verbal commitments, we need real action on climate now and that means we can’t expand the tar sands and we must keep fossil fuels in the ground.”

Daniel T’Seelie, Dene community member (3)

On top of that, with this omission, the Paris agreement will continue the privatizing and sale of Indigenous Peoples’ lands in the Global South for the express purpose of hiding or masking the pollution from the source. For tropical forests, REDD+ means that the world’s most powerful economies will soon begin generating significant incentives within the already bloated and unstable world financial markets for “investing” on forested lands.The US state of California’s AB32 – Global Warming Solutions Act (4) and REDD+, provide mechanisms that designate large swaths of forests for carbon sinks or offsets, with little or no Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), as designated in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Entire communities in the Global South and North are then subject to the loss of their land tenure rights and in many cases are evicted from their homes by military or police actions.(5)

Indigenous Peoples have survived for millennia by adhering to Natural Law, which are comprehensive and unchangeable truths or principles inherent in the natural world. These principles determine how resources are used and protected in order to maintain the regenerative qualities of biodiversity and ensure that all elements of life in this world are able to coexist and thrive. For peoples of the forests, it is understood that this biodiversity is to be respected and cared for because forests are also the lungs of Mother Earth.

Indigenous Peoples are people of the land and of the waters; and we are confronting many challenges: challenges such as extreme changes in the climate, extreme weather events, extreme energy development, and the continued push of economic globalization and a continuation of western forms of development. Fossil fuel development within Indigenous Peoples’ territories, land, water and seas are on the increase. It is business as usual. The petroleum and extractive industries with the helping hand of the governments are expanding exploration to find more fossil fuels and furthering its energy addiction and high consumption levels.

Casey Camp-Horinek, Ponca, Oklahoma, U.S. (6)

Financing, if in any form, should come as penalties to be paid at the source and not from a market where a select few profit. Indigenous peoples and front line traditional communities should be free from roads, mono-crop plantations, mineral and fossil fuel extraction and other forms of mega

projects.*“The transformation of how we protect the lands and territories in which we live, play, and love on will only be influential if we recognize where the change has to come from in order to end land desecration projects and environmental violence. It will come from the primary keepers of the land through means of finding community solutions to end the greed, the corruption, and the colonial thinking. It will come from land-based practices being the only way we can have a relationship with the land. It will come from listening to the words the old people speak, and never again neglecting our true roles, never again breaking the sanctity and prayers that generations before spoke. We must be true to the prayers of those before us, and again not look to colonial meetings for Indigenous solutions. ”*

Andrea Landry, Pays Plat First Nation, Canada (7)

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Indigenous Environmental Network, http://www.ienearth.org/*(1) The Indigenous Environmental Network is an alliance of grassroots IndigenousPeoples whose mission is to protect the sacredness of Mother Earth,http://www.ienearth.org/*

(2) “5000 miles from Grand Bois. Red Road to Paris”, Monique Michelle Verdin,http://indigenousrising.org/5000-miles-from-grand-bois-red-road-to-paris/
(3) Indigenous Environmental Network Press Release, December 2015,http://indigenousrising.org/indigenous-environmental-network-cop21-delegation-responds-to-announcement-of-canadas-support-of-1-5-climate-target/
(4) California's AB32 Global Warming Solutions Act: http://www.arb.ca.gov/cc/ab32/ab32.htm
(5) “Newest Scam on Fringe of Climate Change Involves Land-Grabs in Peruvian Rainforest” http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2012/03/08/newest-scam-fringe-climate-change-involves-land-grabs-peruvian-rainforest-101867
(6) Presentation of the Indigenous Environmental Network and Indigenous Peoples of Mother Earth and our Grandmothers – and Future Generations, http://therightsofnature.org/casey-camp-horinek-opening-expert/
(7) “COP21 Will Not Save our Lands and Territories”, Andrea Landry, http://indigenousrising.org/cop21-will-not-save-our-lands-and-territories/