
[“For a change of paradigm”: Interview with Tom Goldtooth from the Indigenous Environmental Network](#)

What is the Indigenous Environmental Network?

The Indigenous Environmental Network (IEN) was born in 1990 in North America of hope, courage and common vision by Indigenous youth, women and elders of many Tribes to protect our dignity from environmental destruction taking place in our homelands. IEN is a large alliance of Indigenous communities on the frontline of resistance against fossil fuel, mining and toxic industries encroaching upon lands and waterways. We are community-based, grassroots and speak for ourselves under the principles of free, prior and informed consent. Many of our founders come from a long lineage of indigenous resistance against colonization of North America.

How (and why) is it that the implementation of large-scale projects (from oil extraction to highways and dams) most often affects indigenous and traditional communities?

From the perspectives of our Indigenous peoples from the North, the conquest and colonization of our lands and territories by the European settlers starting over 500 years ago was always about the colonizers goals to exert power and control over our lands. So, when the European invaders came to indigenous lands they brought with them a cosmology so different from ours that we couldn't comprehend them and they couldn't comprehend us. The most destructive value that the European invaders imposed is the quantification and objectification of the natural world by imposing a monetary value on sacred things, and committing genocide against the Indigenous peoples who resisted. So, these people, who now have implemented unsustainable economic systems of capitalism, are constantly looking for “natural resources” to feed the big large monster they have created. This monster needs energy, so they look for remote areas of the country to extract minerals, to build large dams, to take our native trees, and even steal our traditional medicines. They need to build roads and train rails to access our lands and territories. We live in a world with a dominant society that always wants to take and take and never give back. They are like a predator species, not a species of compassion and love for the forests, the waters, the land, plants, animals, birds, fish and all life. I believe this dominant society now has a value system of no respect for the sacredness of the female creative principles of Mother Earth and the relationship with Father Sky. They have created neoliberal policies of globalization, liberalization, privatization, deregulation and denationalization that constantly intensify the violation of our inherent rights as Indigenous peoples and violating the natural laws of our Mother Earth, of her biodiversity. This is why they have a quest for oil, for so-called rich minerals under the ground, to tear down all the aged elder trees, to capture the spirit of the water and block the Spirit of the Water's life-flowing cycles.

What does “environmental racism” mean to you?

In the late 1980's and early 1990's in the United States, there were studies conducted that discovered the environmental and public health laws of this country discriminated against Indigenous peoples and people-of-color. By people-of-color, I mean the African American, the Latin American

and the Asian American people. Since the early 1970's there were strong national environmental laws enacted that also required the States to comply with. These were clean air, clean water and many other environmental and health laws and standards. However, in the 1980's it was found that many corporations and factories were building polluting industries in the backyards of people-of-color communities with no regard of these people's health. And, large-scale toxic waste dumping was being done near the communities of these ethnic people including our Indigenous Tribal nations (communities). In the early 1990's the United States and the nuclear industry was pushing plans to dump highly radioactive waste from the nuclear energy reactors in Indigenous lands and territories. The government promised millions of dollars as benefit-sharing agreements to each tribal member to obtain their support of using our lands as a nuclear and toxic waste dump. However, with all these toxic, radioactive, and ecological destructive forms of industrial developments, the US government did not apply the federal environmental laws equally. We called this environmental racism.

This also applies to the extractive industries related to mining and fossil fuel development. The US government, through its Bureau of Indian Affairs programs brokered mining deals with our Tribal governments with false promises that these mining deals and fossil fuel developments would be beneficial. But, the provisions of applying effective environmental standards and regulations to protect water and air quality and the health of our people and the ecosystem and traditional food systems was never addressed. This is ecological and health injustice.

The fact that remotely located Tribal lands across North America contain much of the remaining energy resources, coupled with the desire by the US to achieve "energy independence" using fossil fuels, means that both government and industry are aggressively targeting Tribal lands to meet the US (and Canada) energy needs. This push to exploit fossil fuel resources in indigenous lands is of great concern to all who are working on energy and climate issues.

Because many Tribal communities are economically depressed and Tribal governments are under pressure to provide solutions, the energy industry is able to leverage the promise of short-term economic benefits to gain access to tribal lands and resources. Possession of energy resources coupled with depressed economies result with our many Indigenous Tribes of the North being vulnerable to the destructive and short term economic "solutions" of the dominant world.

Now, this "racism" is practiced worldwide. Elites of the countries in the global South that push their national agenda to exploit the natural environment have no regard for the Indigenous peoples of their countries. Globally, the exploitation and plunder of the world's ecosystems and biodiversity, as well as the violations of the inherent rights of Indigenous Peoples that depend on them, have intensified. Our rights to self-determination, to our own governance and own self-determined development, our inherent rights to our lands, territories and resources are increasingly and alarmingly under attack by the collaboration of governments, transnational corporations and conservationist NGOs. Indigenous activists and leaders defending their territories continue to suffer repression, militarization, including assassination, imprisonment, harassment and vilification as "terrorists." The violation of our collective rights faces the same impunity. Forced relocation or assimilation assault our future generations, cultures, languages, spiritual ways and relationship to the earth, economically and politically. This is happening all over the planet – all over our Mother Earth. All this is an injustice.

And what does this mean for the struggle of Indigenous Peoples?

Looking back at the past 26 years, our Indigenous Peoples and people-of-color within the environmental and economic justice movement have put soul into the environmental movement, taking environmental protection out of its square box; making changes in policies, and building the

base for strategic resistance of grassroots communities disproportionately affected by polluting industries, but more so, for social and economic change, as well.

The struggle for our Indigenous peoples is a rights-based struggle. We, Indigenous Peoples from all regions of the world are defending our Mother Earth – our forests, water, and all Life, from the aggression of unsustainable development and the overexploitation of our natural resources by mining, logging, mega-dams, exploration and extraction of petroleum. Our forests suffer from the production of agro-fuels, bio-mass, plantations and other impositions of false solutions to climate change and unsustainable, damaging development.

We are also fighting the commodification of all Life – of Nature – of Mother Earth and Father Sky. The capitalism of nature is a perverse attempt by corporations, extractive industries and governments to cash in on Creation by privatizing, commodifying, and selling off the Sacred and all forms of life and the sky, including the air we breathe, the water we drink and all the genes, plants, traditional seeds, trees, animals, fish, biological and cultural diversity, ecosystems and traditional knowledge that make life on Earth possible and enjoyable.

Mother Earth is the source of life which needs to be protected, not a resource to be exploited and commodified as a “natural capital.” As Indigenous Peoples, we understand our own place and our responsibilities within Creation’s sacred order. We feel the pain of disharmony of the world when we witness the dishonor of the natural order of Creation and the continued economic colonization and degradation of Mother Earth and all life upon her.

The modern world cannot achieve economic sustainability without environmental justice and without strong environmental ethics that recognizes our human relationship to the sacredness of Mother Earth. The future of mankind depends on a new economic and environmental paradigm that fully recognizes the life-cycles of nature and recognizes the Rights of our Mother Earth.

In addition to our fight for our Rights as Indigenous Peoples, the struggle is for the recognition of the rights of the water to be healthy; and the rights of the Forest and the Sacred Woman of the Forest to be healthy, this is our struggle.

I often share my fears, concerns and insights about the question of our struggles. From the North, I see that if current trends continue, native trees will no longer find habitable locations in our forests, fish will no longer find their streams livable, and humanity will find their homelands flooded or drought-stricken due to a changing climate and unpredictable and extreme weather events. Our Indigenous Peoples have already disproportionately suffered the negative compounding effects of global warming and a changing climate, including the negative effects of the extractive fossil fuel industry and its processing systems.

Mother Earth and her natural resources cannot sustain the consumption and production needs of this modern industrialized society and its dominant economic paradigm, which places value on the rapid economic growth, the quest for corporate and individual accumulation of wealth, and a race to exploit natural resources.

I view the challenges of the non-regenerative production system of the world creating too much waste and toxic pollution. We recognized the need for countries, whether they are here in the North, or in the global South to focus on new economy structures, governed by the absolute limits and boundaries of ecological sustainability, the carrying capacities of Mother Earth. I see the need for a more equitable sharing of global and local resources. I envision the need for encouragement and

support of self-sustaining communities.

As Indigenous peoples we are observing the United Nations, the World Bank, and other financial and private sectors, including energy and extractive industries, and, including States in the United States, such as California, that are pushing a “green” economy agenda that is expanding the commodification, financialization and privatization of the functions of Nature. These functions of Nature are the life-giving cycles of Mother Earth.

I must talk about this as one of the most pressing issues we are facing as Indigenous Peoples. This “green” economy regime places a monetary price on Nature and creates new financial markets that will only increase inequality and expedite the destruction of Nature – of Mother Earth – and in turn, our indigenous homelands. We cannot put the future of Nature and humanity in the hands of financial speculative mechanisms like carbon trading, carbon offset regimes, such as “Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD) and other market systems of conservation and biodiversity offsets.

REDD-type and carbon offset projects are already causing human rights violations, land grabs and environmental destruction. If REDD+ is implemented worldwide, it may open the floodgates to the biggest land grab of the last 500 years. These offset initiatives allow corporate criminals like Shell and Chevron off the hook.

Just as historically the Doctrine of Discovery was used to justify the first wave of colonialism by alleging that Indigenous Peoples did not have souls, and that our territories were “terra nullius,” land of nobody, now carbon trading and REDD+ are inventing similarly dishonest premises to justify this new wave of colonialization and privatization of nature. This is very serious.

The inseparable relationship between humans and the Earth, inherent to Indigenous Peoples, must be respected for the sake of all of our future generations and all of humanity. This is the struggle.

Can you think of other ways of top-down approaches on indigenous territories that are less evident or visible? And if so, could you explain how these impositions are also expressions of environmental racism?

In most national, State and subnational governance systems from the North, to the global South, the mechanisms for meaningful participation of Indigenous Peoples in policy development is lacking. Most governments have a top-down paternalistic policy of deciding what is best for its’ Indigenous Peoples. This is especially true in energy development policies and mineral extraction. The governments very rarely want to grant sub-surface rights to its Indigenous Peoples and limit territorial land rights. There are constant questions as to secret deals being made by national governments that later when implemented infringe on the rights of Indigenous Peoples. So, what are the mechanisms we are advocating for? The principles, or the standards of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) are very important in all governmental decisions being made. FPIC also reserves the inherent right of our Indigenous communities to say No! to any forms of development coming into our territories. In the North, the US government wants to limit our voice and right to say No, by continuing to push the policies of “consultation”. The question is consultation with whom? The governments like to “consult” with our indigenous intermediaries and never actually come down to the grassroots, community level to meet with the collective of our communities to discuss every aspects of a form of development they want to impose on our people. This happens everywhere. Very often they already have made up the plans for development. This is why we demand our indigenous communities be fully informed prior to the development taking place. And, we have the right to be fully informed of all

aspects of what is being proposed. Good and bad. And finally, we have the right to offer our collective consent, even if we have to say no to the project. The government must respect our right to say no. But this is not the case.

How do you think the solidarity movement on social and environmental justice can help the fight against environmental racism in all its forms?

In the North, in the early 1990's when the height of the environmental racism and cry for our demands for environment justice is recognized, we came together as Indigenous Peoples with the minorities, with people-of-colour. We did this as a political strategy to build our power for change. As Indigenous Peoples, we are the "First Nations" and indigenous to the lands and territories of the US, and we said to the people-of-colour and social justice movements that we will stand together with them, as long as they would also stand in solidarity with our rights as Indigenous Peoples. We saw a need to build a power base of solidarity with other social and environmental justice movements to strengthen our voices for change in the US. This strategy continues within the climate movement, as we have applied "justice" to climate. In this climate justice movement, we share many of the same problems with other communities that are poor, who face racism and poverty, and who are being marginalized and discriminated by the dominant society of the US. So, we have formed our own climate justice alliances and mobilizing communities in struggle and who are on the frontlines of the fossil fuel economy to stand with one voice demanding system change, not climate change.

Dialogue is needed amongst Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous people and frontline communities to put pressure on their governments to reevaluate a colonial legal system that doesn't work. This solidarity is needed to build a power base, to develop popular education to inform communities that have historically been oppressed of what is happening to our Mother Earth. Through popular education and principles of community based organizing, more people are recognizing the need for a body of law that recognizes the inherent rights of the environment, of animals, fish, birds, plants, water, and air itself.

Now, we are seeing social Movements starting to see a power structure that has no respect for anyone, except the small 1% of the wealthy elites. They are now starting to see the wisdom and importance of indigenous cosmologies, philosophies and world views. It is a worthy effort to mobilize for system change with other non-Indigenous movements. We need people power to seek and achieve long term solutions turning away from prevailing paradigms and ideologies centered on pursuing economic growth, corporate profits and personal wealth accumulation as primary engines of social well-being. The outside pressures of the world will continue to have negative affects on our Indigenous Peoples. So, how do we change this? We network and build alliances with the non-Indigenous allies and with social movements. The transitions will inevitably be toward dominant societies that can equitably adjust to reduced levels of production and consumption, and increasingly localized systems of economic organization that recognize, honor and are bounded by the limits of nature that recognize the Universal Declaration on the Rights of Mother Earth.

Thank you.