

# AMERICAN INDIAN LAW ALLIANCE

New Mexico Office

44448 Jupiter Street, Albuquerque, NM 87107, 505-341-4230

[ailanm@flash.net](mailto:ailanm@flash.net) - [www.americanindianlawall.org](http://www.americanindianlawall.org)

**doCip  
ARCHIVES**

Commission on Human Rights

Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities

Working Group on Indigenous Populations

Seventeenth Session

26 – 30 July 1999

Agenda Item 5: Indigenous Peoples and Their Relationship to Land  
Presented by Kent Lebsock

My name is Kent Lebsock. I am Lakota and I work for the American Indian Law Alliance in New Mexico and New York providing support to the traditional government and elders of my own Tetuwan Oyate, Lakota Nation. I bring you their greetings and best wishes to the members of the Working Group.

Today, I would like to address the specific issue of buffalo slaughter in the western United States as it applies to the principles within your report, which connect the land with all aspects of Indigenous culture. As you clearly demonstrate in the report, for Lakota people land is not merely a commodity upon which to build industry. In fact the term "land" as used in English, inadequately describes the complex and ancient relationship of the interwoven ecosystems which, for us, include the air, the water, the minerals, the plants, the medicines, the animals, the fish, the birds and, of course, the human beings. That is the concept that is expressed in ending our prayers with Mitaku Oyasin, all my relations. Our culture is based on this relationship and like the eradication of our languages, the genocide of our culture will be most swiftly accomplished through the eradication of our relationship to the land.

For Lakota people, the buffalo is one of our closest relatives and proper respect of our cultural and spiritual relationship to this relative is key to our survival. In respecting the buffalo, as in respecting culture itself, preservation cannot simply be profit driven so that the buffalo becomes nothing more than a cow-like commodity. It is our job to preserve the spiritual connection in preserving the natural world. Article 25 of the Draft Declaration acknowledges this when it says that we have the right to "maintain and strengthen" our distinctive spiritual relationship to the lands. For us, the buffalo is a living sacred site and no more divisible from the land than the dirt itself. The colonizers realized the extent of this connection and in the last century sought to exterminate us by exterminating the buffalo. Recently, this situation has begun to once again occur.

A herd of buffalo have survived within Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming. Many of our elders say that these buffalo are the descendants of the survivors of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century slaughter by the Americans. Recently though, when the winters have been bad, the buffalo have wandered down from Yellowstone into better grazing pastures. Like our ancestors, they do not respect the borders of the colonizers. Stating that the buffalo are a health threat to cattle (although this cannot be scientifically proven), an alliance of ranchers and government agencies have slaughtered the buffalo. In defense of these relatives, teams of mostly young people, Indian and non-Indian together, have been following the herds all winter and herding them off private land and, when necessary, putting themselves between the rifles and the buffalo. One of our leaders has said that this is a brutal, deliberate war against a species. For us, it is difficult to separate this kind of slaughter from the holocaust or the Indian massacres. It is genocide of a culture, as well as a species. Our responsibility has always been to the natural world. From our creation stories, the buffalo are our close relatives representing the inseparable line we have with all our relations. It is not just our duty, therefore, to preserve the natural world, but to build a responsible role for humankind within the natural world. We would urge the Working Group and its rapporteurs to continue to emphasize this Indigenous worldview and to include the plight of the buffalo as a continuing example of the cultural extermination that is still being carried out. It is our intent to put this issue in front of tomorrow's leaders so that all will remember our role and our responsibility.

Pila maya yelo. Mitaku Oyasin

WGIP 99 / NAM. USA / 17