

Clean Water, a Human Right  
National Indian Youth Council (NIYC)  
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Across the world there are severe water problems that affect all people, but especially the world's Indigenous people who live closer to the earth. Clean water is a human right. One of the important perspectives in considering in the struggle for clean water is the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples passed in 2007. In its preamble it says:

“Recognizing the urgent need to respect and promote the inherent rights of indigenous peoples which derive from their political, economic and social structures and from their cultures, spiritual traditions, histories and philosophies, especially their rights to their lands, territories and resources...”

Indigenous peoples often suffer first and worst. In approaching their needs through the Declaration, a new and unique tool for this movement can be utilized.

The first major initiative of the National Indian Youth Council (NIYC) was over fifty years ago when it led efforts called “fish-in-protests” over the way the State of Washington was breaking treaties with Native peoples. The treaties guaranteed fishing rights and prohibited the pollution of the salmon waters.

NIYC began in 1962 to advocate for the human right to clean water. One of the important United Nations Millennium Development goals for 2015 is to reduce by half the 1.1 billion people who lack access to safe drinking water. Gains have been made but our rights to water for the world's indigenous peoples needs international protections.

On November 7, 2005, the US House of Representatives passed the Paul Simon Water for the Poor Act. This legislation called on the United States to establish innovative international coordination in establishing best practices and assistance in developing countries, so that people can meet their right to clean water.

In our Native societies women have the responsibility to care for the water, our Grandmother the Moon is in charge of the water from the tides, the sacred rain, the lakes, rivers and oceans that surround us to the water in our wombs where life grows, to the drops of dew on the grass. the waters of tidal waves, the hurricanes and the tsunamis. We are surrounded by the most gracious gift, the sacred waters.

We have gods of the water. We have ceremonies for the water and today we have an assault on our most precious gift, our water. The right to clean water is more than the availability of water. it also means the protection of our water from those forces that would exploit and pollute our water. From our most northern territory in Alaska to our southern waters in the Gulf of Mexico. our water has already been put at risk.

Exxon Valdez oil spill, March 24, 1989. Prince William Sound, Alaska.

BP Deepwater Horizon spill, April 15 – July 20, 2010.

Enbridge tar sands spill in Michigan's Kalamazoo River, July 26, 2010.

Exxon Mobil Pegasus Pipeline in Arkansas when contaminated water was pumped into the Lake Conway, April 14, 2013.

To name just a few of the recent accidents. There have been others in Colorado, New Mexico, Texas and Pennsylvania.

We have industrial toxic waste; corporations dumping waste into our waters, runoff from chemical plants, fertilizers, mercury in our water and insecticides; Atrazine is added to our drinking water. Petcoke, a pipeline waste product sits alongside of waterways in Michigan. leeching into the Detroit River which empties into the Great Lakes, putting the largest fresh water in the world in harm's way. Acid rain pollutes everything including water. Commercial fisheries use dynamite, bleach, cyanide as they exploit the water to increase their profit: fishing is a 20 billion dollar a year industry worldwide and 20% of food from the waters feeds all people around the world.

In Bristol Bay, Alaska, the Pebble Mine would threaten thousands of acres of pristine watershed and destroy the spawning grounds of sockeye salmon. As much as 90 miles of streams and 4,800 acres of wetlands would be destroyed. The Yupik Inuit communities call for justice on this issue that they oppose.

Fishing is one of the world's most widespread subsistence technologies. Fish are very sensitive to pollution. Indigenous people suffer when they lack access to traditional waters for subsistence fishing.

Today in the Gulf of Mexico, there is a "dead zone" where nothing lives. These waters have been killed by harmful algae blooms and hypoxia where too little oxygen in the bottom water destroys all marine life. Fertilizers, pesticides, fertilizing with animal manure, chemical dumping have made this Dead Zone grow. These waters were traditional fishing territories of the Choctaw of Louisiana and Mississippi and other indigenous peoples of the US Gulf Coast.

The impact of the "dead zone" caused by these problems are many:

- Kills many of the fish species.
- Shellfish cannot be harvested because shellfish absorb pollutants.
- Coastal habitat is lost to many species of fish, birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians.
- Loss of commercial fishing and subsistence fishing.
- Unsafe beaches as a result of toxic fertilizers and pesticides unsafe for humans.
- Serious threat to health of all living things as pollution intensifies.
- Loss of shells which are used in ceremony, ornamentation, wampum. Shells are tainted by contaminants and unable to be used.

Fracking which is a hydraulic method of fracturing of drilling and injecting water into the ground at a very high pressure to release natural gas deep inside the earth. Fracking one well uses millions of gallons of fresh water that oil companies call frack waste. Then roads and pipelines destroy watersheds and the water is further contaminated. This abuse of the water must stop. All life is dependent on water and the water is at-risk, the lakes, rivers and oceans.

NIYC and indigenous peoples wish to promote and strengthen our right to clean sacred water. This is a moral right and a basic human right. Water is not a commodity to be bought or sold, it is an inherent right of all species of living things.

We call for the implementation of measures to protect indigenous peoples' right to clean water and the monitoring of indigenous peoples' rights under the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

*The National Indian Youth Council(NIYC) is a nation-wide Indian non-profit corporation that was founded in 1961. NIYC is certified as being in consultative status to the Economic and Social Committee (ECOSOC) of the United Nations General Assembly as an (NGO) non-governmental organization.*

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